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Art Writing and Subjectivity:
Critical Association in Art-Historical Practice

Lizzie Lloyd

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of PhD in the Faculty of Arts.

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Abstract

This thesis stages three pairings of artworks and texts – Francisco de Zurbarán and Susan Sontag (chapter 2); Walter Pater and Peter Doig (chapter 3); Michael Simpson and Gertrude Stein (chapter 4) – that are connected through a perceived material and phenomenological association articulated through my writing. The basis for their connection is neither historical, thematic nor causal. The matter of writing in this thesis is, therefore, key: it is used less as a vehicle to convey falsifiable findings than as a means to generate ideas, and an exploratory performance of research. As a result, its form, style and timbre is highly contingent on its physical, emotive and intellectual encounters with particular artworks and texts. The character of each chapter is distinct in tone, mood and content because these qualities materialise through the occasion of their writing; they are individuated ‘bespoke’ responses where my words in each chapter are ‘site-specific’, alive to the landscape of particular images and words, enacting and bearing witness to the critical nature of association at stake in each chapter. In this way, fundamental questions emerge around how the coupling of texts and images suggest themselves. How do they unfold in thought and writing? And what is the value and implication of foregrounding the development of their association as the objective of research in its own right?

This manner of approaching art and writing harnesses subjectivity as an active, responsive, and ultimately improvisatory, mode of thought and feeling while simultaneously maintaining productive tension with the discipline of art history at large. Since subjectivity here makes itself felt in the way that it asserts itself through the writing into association of each pairing – through, for example, description, affective response, experimental rendering and serendipitous detour – the manner of its writing is both reflective and performative. This thesis focuses on the practice rather than the product of research, asking what an approach like this can add to disciplines like criticism, art history, and art writing.

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Elements of this thesis have been presented at various conferences, workshops and seminars. Most valuable of these was 'Situate Yourself' (2012, Concordia University, Canada) and 'Hybrid Writing: Literature as Criticism, Criticism as Literature' (2016, University of East Anglia, UK) for which I thank the conference convenors for their inclusion of my work and the attendees for their support and critique.

Thank you to Rebecca O'Dwyer for extending an invitation to me to contribute to her project 'Response to a Request', a version of which forms part of chapter 3 here. Thanks to Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield with whom I worked between in 2013 and 2014 on the translations of Giovanni Gentile which are referenced throughout this thesis. Thanks to Michael Simpson for your many conversations.

Three funded writing residencies – at the Arvon Foundation (supported by Visual Arts South West), at Arnolfini Gallery and in Plymouth for the Art Writers Group (funded by Arts Council England) – have given me invaluable opportunities to keep at it. Throughout this process a number of artists, writers, curators and editors have helped hone my writing by offering me freelance opportunities to write for, with and about them. You know who you are – thanks for taking a chance on me.

And to my family: In many more ways than one neither I nor this text would be here without my parents whose support and patience have been a wonder. My children, Archie, Emmett and Len – the oldest of whom was a mere 7 years when I began – have been a source of constant amazement and necessary distraction (even if I didn't always know it at the time). Thank you, boys, for your patience, your mid-sentence shoulder massages, and morale-boosting cuddles (I couldn't see my computer screen at the time but they were worth it).

The biggest thanks must go to my husband, Owen, who has fed me, watered me, picked up my pieces, and reminded me, on more than one occasion, that this is just a process. You are the greatest.

Declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: DATE:.....

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Introduction

Essays are intact and seamless and well-made – except when they are not, when they fracture and fail and open themselves up to the possibility that they will not please.¹

Brian Dillon

¹ Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), p. 21.

Murmurations of images and words gather here. A spark precipitates impressionistic and unanticipated connections between them, impelling others to join the multitude. As they do, their collective form swoops, billows, pirouettes, enfolds, pauses, hangs back and peters out. Within the flock closer relationships form. These connections generate particular types of behaviour: mirroring, analogous manoeuvring, splitting off. As you picture the characteristics of these hypothetical relations you begin to realise not just that you cannot keep up, because they are constantly morphing, changing direction, adjusting, but also that the individual elements that you set out to observe seem to respond to your presence there. The words that you have thrown skywards in an attempt to capture, trace, describe in movement, now dance around you too. You watch as those words, your words, disperse, silhouetted against a paper-white sky. The space between them dilates and contracts, by turns appearing to follow and lead; hardly distinguishable, they begin to be absorbed into the swarm.

Brief Overview

With my primary focus on the practice, rather than the product, of research, my thesis is like a murmuration. It bears witness to the pairings of works of visual art and texts which are brought together primarily by an accident of association in the mind of me, the observer. The interrogation of this association is enacted through extended readings of paintings or texts through ekphrastic descriptions, affective responses, experimental renderings and associational detours. It simultaneously tackles the matter of why the pairings of a particular text and a particular image suggest themselves in the way that they do and what the implications of this approach are for the practice of research in the visual arts.

I often refer to the writing I employ as ‘active’, by which I refer to the way that writing here generates its content as it goes along rather than conveying thought after the fact of thinking. As present and in-progress the writing of this thesis is self-reflective and self-reflexive and allows a series of themes and critical frameworks to surface. These include: the emergence of thought; critical association and improvisation; the relationship between performance, practice and theory; the essay as an experimental

form of research; the impact of subjectivity in writing art histories; and types of concrete findings expected of a doctoral thesis.

The pairings around which my thesis swarms are connected by critical and discursive association rather than historically, thematically or causally. Subjectivity is the catalyst and undercurrent that makes them possible, and is the means by which I explore their association. I harness subjectivity obliquely, as an active and responsive *mode* of thought, which lends a specific focus to the pairings of each chapter. The type of subjectivity that manifests here is, therefore, enacted through the writing by which the pairings emerge, giving primacy to felt experiences and exposing associative thought processes. As echoes between images and texts gather, the following chapters wonder at the process by which these analogies suggest themselves. How do they come about? What happens if we pay attention to their perceived association, rather than passing it off as relative, momentary and insignificant? The means and mode of association at play here should, therefore, be understood as active and inherent to the thesis' research process, rather than as extraneous.

By giving primacy to this kind of writing and thinking questions unfold about what research into the visual arts can (rather than should) do. Writing like this fuels thought around what the practice of research in the visual arts might look, sound and feel like and what the implications of such a mode are to disciplines like criticism, art history, and art writing. I choose my words – 'practice of research' – carefully. One of the things that distinguishes this thesis is its approach to keeping in tension its relationship to, both a conventional humanities research PhD and a practice-led PhD; it is located somewhere between art writing and art history or art writing *as* art history. It is concerned with art history not as a vehicle for recording information but as a performance of thought in progress. Similarly it is interested in art writing, less as a vehicle to convey falsifiable findings than as a means to generate ideas, an exploratory performance of research through the act of writing. By foregrounding art-historical writing as a process that drives content, the subtlety and sometimes elusiveness of its form – as both object and subject – becomes integral to the research methodology as well as to its findings. It is akin in spirit to Paul Klee's meditation on the character of

drawing: 'A line comes into being,' he writes, 'it goes for a walk';² form, content, affinities and differences develop in the process of writing an idea.

The way in which this thesis 'comes into being' is, in part, by focussing on details and on single paintings, texts or at times even single sentences. Attention to the detail of artwork is, of course, a familiar art-historical strategy; it functions as the backbone to Connoisseurship, Formalism, Neoformalism and Conservation.³ T. J. Clark's, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006) is built around devoted attention to two paintings, an approach that is supported by copious high resolution colour illustrations of the images, both whole and cropped. Clark, you sense, takes pleasure in his keen skills of observation and his ability to sustain pages of writing that turn on minutiae: 'a smudge of sun on the horses back', 'a splash of white below the sockets [and] the wisp of hair against the flat blue of the lake' and the 'pinheads up in the castle windows'.⁴ Sometimes, this kind of viewing plays a very particular, historically contextualising, role in his argument. Of *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (National Gallery, London, 1648), for example, he deduces Poussin's painting process by focussing on the space between the fingers of one of the figures which has been 'painted delicately [...] after the fingers were sufficiently dry'.⁵ On another occasion, speaking of *Landscape with a Calm* (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 1650–1651), Clark disavows an earlier claim that Poussin suffered from trembling hands caused by syphilis: 'All I can say, with *my eye a foot from the picture surface*', he proclaims with an authority and self-assurance that appears granted by his proximity to the painting, 'is that [Poussin's hands] cannot have been trembling much; or that Poussin must have built up ways of painting *through* the tremors'.⁶ In these examples, focussed viewing is deployed to discern, from the material of the artworks, what the conditions of their making were at

² Robert Kudielka ed., *Paul Klee: The Nature of Creation* (London and Burlington: Haywood Gallery and Lund Humphries, 2002), p. 53; original reference in Jürg Spiller ed., *The Thinking Eye. The Notebooks of Paul Klee*, Ralph Mannheim, Charlotte Wielder and Joyce Wittenborn trans. (London and New York: Lund Humphries, 1961), p. 105.

³ See Carlo Ginzburg and Anna Davin, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method', *History Workshop*, 9 (Spring, 1980), pp. 5–36.

⁴ T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 34, 140 and 168 respectively.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 189.

⁶ First italics are my own; second italics are in the original. *ibid.*, p. 57.

the time of execution with a degree of historical accuracy, Clark assures us, that is greater than previous accounts which focus less on the paintings themselves.

For Daniel Arasse in *Take Another Look* (2000), however, close-up viewing functions slightly differently. Though he uses the technique to question received interpretations of works of art, he does not have, as Clark at various points does, ‘texts or archival documents to back [him] up’. Arasse knows that this approach might open him up to criticism of being ‘not historically serious’ but, he goes on, ‘I think we have to fight against a line of thought that claims to be “historical” while actually preventing us from thinking’.⁷ Though my position here is far less provocative than Arasse’s articulation, something of his quest to promote the act and process of looking as a generator of thought – which also for Arasse entails an embracing of the human imagination’s propensity to take liberties – is present here. He knows that his interpretations sometimes verge on the excess: ‘You’re going to tell me yet again’ he says, addressing Giulia, his implicit critic and to whom his book-length fictionalised letter is directed, ‘that I’m, going too far – that I’m having a good time, but that I’m also overinterpreting’.⁸ I will come to the problem of interpretation in chapter 2 in relation to Susan Sontag, where I will make clear that interpretation is not what this thesis contributes. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Arasse argues for the legitimacy of his approach on the basis that it enables you to ‘see what a painter and painting are showing you’.⁹ Though this thesis is driven by a spirit of, at once, close, imaginative and expansive looking it does so less purposively than Arasse would have it. My thesis focuses on potential and associative thinking, catalysed by looking, rather than attempting to uncover intended effects, consequences or meanings of texts and images. My thesis, to adapt Arasse’s claim then, helps to see what painters and paintings and

⁷ Daniel Arasse, *Take a Closer Look*, Alyson Waters trans. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 13–15.

⁸ *ibid.* p.86. On other reservations of this kind of ‘over-interpretation’ under the guise of close looking see Whitney Davis, ‘The Close Reading of Artefacts’, in *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011); James Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles? On the Origins of Modern Pictorial Complexity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Siri Hustvedt, *Mysteries of the Rectangle: Essays on Painting* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005); and Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001). See also Sam Rose’s excellent overview of close looking in ‘Close Looking and Conviction’, *Art History*, 40(1) (2016).

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 3.

writers and texts, together, didn't know they were showing you until you started to write, see and think them into relation.

But my focus on details in this thesis never, in any case, figures in isolation. My view is generative; placing observations in a more expansive landscape results in the accumulation of further connections with other artworks and texts. I use the technique of close looking impressionistically. I identify motifs, metaphors, structures, turns of phrases, or incidents of painterly or textual handling that appear to enact confluences across genres to interrogate the character of the pairings that chapters 2, 3 and 4 pose. For example, in chapter 2 I pair an attention on the materiality of a still life painting and the phenomenology of my encounter with comparisons with extant responses to the same or comparable artworks. This, in turn, spurs broader reflection on critical and theoretical approaches to paintings and the relationships between practice and research. I enact, therefore, a series of performative and reflective art-historical and art-critical encounters with artworks, weaving in and out, and even merging art history, criticism and writing as practice, and art history, criticism and writing as theory.

Preliminary Thoughts on Structure and Tone

This introduction sets out the means by which the chapters that follow emerge through their writing, as a form of practice as research which combines, or rather enmeshes its approach to, and enactment of, research. What follows is an extended discussion and performance of a particular approach to research material as an activity that we might, after Umberto Eco, call 'in progress'.¹⁰ This unpredetermined openness guides the shape of the thesis as well as the structure of individual paragraphs and even sentences. I often come at a thought obliquely or indirectly, giving the impression of writing *around* it rather than straight on, as you might an argument. My later discussion of Michael Oakeshott's *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (1955) unpicks some of the ways in which the principle of the 'argument' is not appropriate in this instance. This thesis, instead, takes a more conversational approach to critical thinking manifesting in various ways: by the pairings that frame each chapter; by the

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, 'The Poetics of the Open Work', in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner eds. (New York and London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 167–175, p. 174.

way that observations are arrived at accumulatively; and by the way that ideas are handled, worried, and passed to and fro between the works and figures that inhabit each chapter. At a basic level it is ruminative, a form of thinking aloud and passing between dialogic relationships, enacting connections between words and images through modes of verbal and experiential interchange. Chapter 1 is framed by an in-depth discussion of poetic art histories. By cross-referencing a series of wide-ranging instances of poetic or lyrical thinking through art history it unpacks key ideas that ground the performative approaches – enacted particularly in chapters 2, 3 and 4 – in a bed of substantial art-historical research. Chapter 2 is characterised by a ventriloquising; it activates the voice of Susan Sontag (1933–2004) through reflection on Francisco de Zurbarán’s *Still Life with Four Vessels* (The Prado, c. 1660) (fig. 1).¹¹ Chapter 3 enacts a confluence I have perceived in Walter Pater’s ‘Conclusion’ (1868) (1839–1894) and a selection of Peter Doig’s paintings (1959–). Through it the work of both shifts fluidly, amorphously, together and apart. And, finally, in chapter 4 the work of Michael Simpson (1940–) and Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) is annexed, their interrelation one of awkward juxtaposition.

Due to its gradual accumulation this thesis is drawn from a sprawling web of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, critical, epistemological, and phenomenological interrelations. It tunes into parallel discussions from different sub-literatures – practice as research, the essay, art writing, embodied art histories, conversation, association, subjectivity – making use of them, sometimes tangentially, sometimes more directly, to help orient my thinking on a particular subject. In place of a separate ‘literature review’ I engage with various relevant sub-literatures as I go along instead of addressing them in isolation through a separate preliminary section. The positive choice to do so is crucial given that one of my major aims is to *document*, as closely as possible, the felt process of research in progress by paying attention to the coincidences of thought, and the associations between critical approaches and bodies of literature that emerge.¹²

¹¹ After this point I will usually, for brevity’s sake, refer to *Still Life with Four Vessels* as *Four Vessels*.

¹² I will return to the idea of what follows as being ‘documentary’ in my Conclusion where I suggest various ways in which this research could be further developed.

That said, I take the time in chapter 1 to contextualise and set the scene for what I call my ‘non-methodology’. This discussion is built on, and between, a wide-ranging selection of sub-literatures – ranging from philosophy, to art history, criticism and scholarship on creative writing – in order to be absolutely clear about what the implications of such an ‘in progress’ approach to thinking about the relationships between art, writing, subjectivity and critical associations might be.

What follows is categorically not intended, however, as a debunking of the heterogeneous approaches employed by art historians. Indeed, I make use of conventional scholarly research and techniques but I am advocating a radical methodological pluralism. Methodologies all approach their research from a specific point of view and all add something.¹³ But when we constrain ourselves too strictly within any given methodology, lending the impression of deciding in advance what it might be, we also inevitably leave something out, as chapter 2 of this thesis demonstrates. What is going on here should, therefore, be understood as a supplement to, not substitute for, other art-historical methods since my general approach is inherently open-ended, a responsive (non-)methodology which *reflects* and *reflects on* the material of its research as it goes along.

It is also true, however, that I identify widespread discontent with the discipline’s language, prevailing methodologies, and handling of primary sources, voiced by

¹³ The idea of Methodological Pluralism is more thoroughly theorised and self-consciously implemented in the Philosophy of Sciences and Social Sciences. See Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (Guilford: Verso, 1993); R. B. Norgaard, ‘The Case for Methodological Pluralism’, *Ecological Economics*, 1(1) (1989), pp. 37–57; Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009); S. Hesse-Biber and R. B. Johnson, ‘Coming at Things Differently: Future Directions of Possible Engagement with Mixed Methods Research’, *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 7(2) (2013).

numerous art-historians and writers.¹⁴ Siri Hustvedt, who does not name names, has grave misgivings about those art historians who,

march through linear, horizontal time with its periods and changing styles, their language coloured by an almost phobic relation to the emotional, pre-theoretical, vertical qualities of art viewing, a fear related to biases of agency and power and to the fact that passion and the body have been understood as effeminate and reason and the mental as manly, a dualist tradition that infects our memories, our expectations, and our perceptions.¹⁵

And Gavin Parkinson characterises such art histories as entailing:

the communication of thoughts, feelings, findings, and arguments about objects, events, and the past by means of the carefully and coherently organized plan; observation of and respect for causality and the clock and calendar time of the world; dissolution of authorship or announcement of subjectivity in the capture of the surveyed material; use of reason in search of rational connectivity between human beings, their contexts, behaviour, and work; and the exercise of balance and 'critical distance' in search of underlying motivations, interpreting phenomena in the services of conclusivity by means of methods that mimic those of scientific causality (whether this goes undeclared or not).¹⁶

This thesis could be understood, then, as another possibility, an alternative to the 'rational orthodoxy', as Parkinson puts it, of the kinds of art histories which he

¹⁴ I discuss this at greater length below at various points but especially in the section 'Art Writing/Creative Criticism/Art Criticism/Art History'. See James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998); James Elkins, *What is Interesting Writing in Art History?* (Morrisville, North Carolina: lulu.com, 2017); James Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); James Elkins (2013) <<http://305737.blogspot.co.uk>> [accessed 9 May 2013]; W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Donald Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989); Michael Ann Holly, 'Mourning and Method', in *Compelling Visuality*, Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg eds. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 165; T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death*; Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois's Spider: The Architecture of Art Writing* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001); Jaś Elsner, 'Art History as Ekphrasis', *Art History*, 33(1) (2010); Paul Barolsky, 'Writing Art History', in 'Writing (and) the History of Art', *The Art Bulletin*, 78 (1996), p. 398; David Carrier, 'Erwin Panofsky, Leo Steinberg, David Carrier: The Problem of Objectivity in Art Historical Interpretation', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 47(4) (Autumn, 1989), p. 346; David Carrier, 'Arcticism—writing, Arthistory—writing, Artwriting', *The Art Bulletin*, 78(3) (1996), pp. 401–403; and Catherine Grant and Patricia Rubin eds., 'Creative Writing and Art History', *Art History*, 34(2) (2011). To this list we could also add Sontag, *Against Interpretation*. See also Matthew Rampley's description of the 'deadening grid of systematic analysis', in Rampley, 'The Poetics of the Image: Art History and the Rhetoric of Interpretation', *Marburger Jahrbuch Für Kunstwissenschaft*, 35 (2008), p. 8, which I shall come to shortly.

¹⁵ Siri Hustvedt, *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art Sex and Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), p. 472.

¹⁶ Gavin Parkinson, '(Blind Summit) Art Writing Narrative, Middle Voice', in Grant and Rubin eds., 'Creative Writing and Art History', p. 270.

describes and implicitly questions.¹⁷ For example, I replace, what Parkinson characterises as art history's 'organized plan' with a more gradual, responsive and piecemeal approach to research materials as in-process. I nearly always sideline a 'respect for causality', as the section below on the transhistorical will show. And rather than 'rational connectivity' I harness something more like an intuitive connectivity. I make use, on the whole, of proximity rather than 'distance', my methods also steering clear of 'scientific causality'. And finally, rather than the 'dissolution of authorship' I offer an enactment of an active, morphing subjectivity which determines and is determined by the form, content and tone of its research materials rather than the more static, positional 'announcement of subjectivity' that Parkinson identifies.

One of the difficulties I have encountered through this research is the variety of terms, often interchangeable, used to denote subjectively driven engagements with art and art history – subjective, personal, aesthetic, poetic and lyrical, for example. The form, character and edges of subjectivity are inherently and necessarily fuzzy. As a *mode of inquiry* it reveals itself through a whole series of methodological approaches: interpretation, personal voice, autobiography, connoisseurship and ekphrasis. I touch on art-historical examples of these modes to unpick their epistemological and interpretative implications before landing on a particular variety of subjectivity, theorised by the Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile, which aligns more closely with the particular subjective mode metabolised here. But to be clear, the scope and character of subjectivity playing out here is non vernacular, dialogic, serendipitous, associational, active and self-reflexive, emergent and ongoing.

Extended Overview

Since the form, style and timbre of this thesis is contingent on its encounters – simultaneously performed and observed – with other artworks it is important to set out early on the content of the chapters that follow as well as to describe the nature of their incubation and emergence across these pages. The beginnings of the thesis were unruly. Trying to pinpoint my research questions involved much actual and metaphorical gesticulation in the attempt to convey the feeling of the piece to my supervisors. I could

¹⁷ Parkinson, '(Blind Summit) Art Writing Narrative, Middle Voice', p. 285.

feel the shape of it in my mouth, the ring of it in my head, but my vocal chords and the cavity of my mouth and the muscles of my tongue and cheeks felt flaccid and uncooperative, unable to translate this amorphous feeling into solid words. Those words, in fact, remained out of reach until I began looking closely at specific paintings and words.

As the pairings finally emerged they each elicited their own individuated ‘bespoke’ responses. The character of each chapter is, as a result, distinctive in tone, mood and content because it materialised through the specific moments of their writing. That is not to suggest that this is a jamboree of relative claims in which anything goes. These chapters are, in a sense, site specific, roaming around a particular landscape of images and words which unfold gradually; they are autonomous and self-contained but at the same time interwoven: concerns raised in one chapter find themselves resurfacing elsewhere too.

In my closing remarks I discuss how the processes at play in this thesis might also be framed as enacting an improvised handling of art-historical writing and thought. The matter of the thesis’s relationship with improvisatory methodologies warrants a few words of preliminary explanation here too. The way in which, for example, its trajectory is founded on a willingness to be receptive to, adjust with, and ride the wave of intuitions that spark associations between works of art, literature and scholarship but which is, at the same time, informed by a broader understanding of the disciplines which it mines, adheres to Edgar Landgraf’s definition of improvisation. Improvisation, he claims, is much maligned by modern and contemporary culture due to its being all too often defined by its experimental, un-fixed inventiveness. This, Landgraf contends, constitutes a serious oversimplification. Improvisation, he goes on, is in fact founded on a rigorous understanding of the critical, philosophical and historical context of a given discipline. It is ‘not about the absence of rules and structures, nor about the advent of true Otherness, but rather can be understood as a *self-organising process* that relies on and *stages* the particular constraints that encourage the emergence of something new

and inventive.’¹⁸ The ‘self-organising process’ that I put into play here is guided by enmeshed relationships between writing, subjectivity and the ways in which these modes behave in particular artistic, literary and historical environments.

What this improvisatory approach allows for, is the possibility of exploring connections that, at first sight, might seem implausible. But this thesis is concerned with the difficulty of teasing out and articulating connections that are empirically sensed but, because they are apparently unprovable via traditional means of historical investigation, might be disregarded as coincidental, provisional, or expressions of passing incidental conviction, but not sturdy enough to hold the weight of serious, rigorous scholarly research. Though not primarily derived from historical or archival research the commitment and sustained attention that I employ through the thesis constitutes a thoroughness of thought and application both specific and generalised. I worry, for example, at the philosophical implications of associative approaches to writing on art. I wonder at the relationships that explicit modes of subjective encounter elicit between art and writing and wander, nomadically, between disciplines that touch on the interrelationships between art and writing.

The nature and character of thought that emerges from each of the following chapters is reflected back in the form of their writing; the process of their writing bears relaying since it captures much of the essence of the thesis.¹⁹ Chapter 1 came last; it began life as an introduction but, in length and substance, it ended up spilling out of its original boundaries, going far beyond its introductory remit, and finally nudging its way into the body of the thesis. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 were written in the order that they appear here.

¹⁸ Edgar Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art: Conceptual Challenges, Historical perspectives* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 5 my emphases. Other key scholarship on improvisation includes, but is not limited to: Gilbert Ryle, ‘Improvisation,’ *Mind*, 85(337) (1976), 69–83; David Gere and Ann Cooper Albright, eds., *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003); Gary Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies Volume 1*, First Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Simon Shaw-Miller, *Improvisation: Orphic Gaze in the Age of Jazz* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming 2020)

¹⁹ I should make clear at this point, as I do later, that the kernel for this thesis was developed through my Master’s dissertation entitled, ‘Picturing Subjective Art Histories: The Accumulative Eye in the Paintings of Peter Doig’ (University of Bristol, 2009) which is where I first made the association between Doig’s painting and Pater’s writing. I did not however return to this material again until after writing chapter 2 of this thesis on Zurbarán’s *Four Vessels* and Sontag’s writing.

Chapter 2 began with a long session of browsing the digital archive of the Prado collection when I chanced on Zurbarán's *Four Vessels*.²⁰ This super high-resolution image that I found myself zooming into and out of, sliding my eye and cursor across – and that appeared to glow (as digital reproductions are wont to do) from my computer screen – engendered a feeling in me that this image, this thing, must be written, that I must find appropriate words and order them in such a way that they *feel* right, do justice or form a tacit understanding of the painting. My writing, to start with, appeared on the page in the manner of an exercise in automatic writing. I became fascinated with how and why it was taking the shape that it was. As time went on, Sontag's words began to interject in the space between my own and Zurbarán's marks. Their difficulty, their forthrightness, their ambiguity began to assert themselves, setting up a triangle of relations which the chapter traces.

Like the painting to which it responds, chapter 2 is a staging. It mounts a series of art-historical and critical interpretations of Zurbarán's still life from a variety of angles. Although Sontag never wrote on Zurbarán, there are affinities (and crucial differences) between her approach to artworks and my own, and between *Four Vessels* and the works of art on which she did write. The chapter questions the significance of such felt affinities by ventriloquising Sontag's writerly voice, tone, sentiments – redeploying her criticism and interpretative approaches – while simultaneously remaining responsive to the effect of her bringing into play the role of her own active subjectivity through her practice and theory of art criticism. The chapter wonders at the extent to which the works of Sontag and Zurbarán, taken together and in partnership with my thesis, offer a phenomenological enactment of the physical and intellectual encounter with art and ideas. It suggests that considered art writing might in itself be capable of producing forms of knowledge about art that go beyond historical truths or likelihoods.

²⁰ It is of course often said that works of art should be viewed in the flesh and that digital reproductions do not do them justice but it intrigues me that I could be so taken by the process of viewing this small painting via on-screen reproduction. See James Elkins on the kind of unnaturally or anachronistically close-viewing – or what Elkins terms 'pathological' 'peering' – that ultra high-definition images of art, such as those generated by the Google Art Project, engender. See Elkins, 'Is Google Bringing us too Close to Art?', *The Daily Dot*, 21-03-13 [last accessed, January 3, 2019].

Chapter 3 was a different proposition, a return to a pairing I had explored, briefly, before and which was originally sparked by the 2008 solo exhibition of Peter Doig's work at Tate Britain, an exhibition that left me physically exhilarated and emotionally reeling.²¹ That experience formed the catalyst for my 2009 Master's dissertation on what I termed 'Embodied Art Histories', an approach to art history of which I came to see Doig's work as a visual embodiment. In developing Doig and Pater's relationship in the context of this thesis, their coming together took on the characteristics of water. Where chapter 2 is structured, separated into clearly defined subsections, chapter 3 finds the mellifluousness of its materials more difficult to handle. Its trajectory meanders, slippages occur disrupting straightforward logical orders. Themes emerge and are later submerged; impressions and partial impressions prevail. Chapter 3 is wayward, ill-defined, its writing muddled and awash with uncertainty. As a result of trying to orient my writing within the landscape of this chapter it felt caught in a series of fluctuating eddies and flows, as if my words floated, drowned and were washed-up by the confluence of Pater's writing and Doig's paintings.

Both Pater's 'Conclusion' and Doig's painting are inflected with a sense of serendipity, through a lyrical handling of their materials in a manner that might be considered self-indulgent. The accusation of solipsism has been levelled, at various points, at Walter Pater, Gertrude Stein and Susan Sontag, three writers that form part of my three pairings here. Stein, as we will see, has often been described as a 'self-promoter, endlessly self-important'.²² For Perry Meisel 'Pater's solipsism [...] is erected on a spatial metaphor whose truth he is intent to deny as he requires it in order to deny it'.²³ Irving Howe's reception of 'the new sensibility' of the 1960s, of which Sontag was a leading theorist, similarly implies a critique of solipsism, as James Penner has pointed out. Howe declared that, 'The new sensibility is impatient with ideas. It is impatient with literary structures of complexity and coherence [...]. It wants works of literature – though

²¹ Lizzie Lloyd, 'Picturing Subjective Art Histories: The Accumulative Eye in the Paintings of Peter Doig' (MA thesis: University of Bristol, 2009).

²² Chloe Schama, 'Literary Landmarks: A History of American Women Writers', interview with Chloe Schama, *Smithsonian Magazine* (March 6 2009) <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/literary-landmarks-a-history-of-american-women-writers-56536736/> [accessed 10 January 2017].

²³ Perry Meisel, *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 114–115.

literature may be the wrong word – that will be as absolute as the sun, as unarguable as the orgasm, and as delicious as the lollipop’.²⁴ But Penner sees Howe’s outburst as ‘anchored in gendered binaries’: ‘The rational – read: masculine – tradition of high modernism is pitted against the facile and self-indulgent sensibility of “lollipops and “orgasms”: the frivolous devotion to camp and Dionysian fantasies of easy ecstasy’.²⁵

This thesis too is streaked through with a serendipity that it takes seriously, a strategy that renders our positions as readers, writers, painters, viewers and scholars vulnerable to accusations of solipsism, or so it appears. But perhaps we ought to reevaluate the role of serendipity in the construction of our academic house of cards. Is it extraneous, a bracketed coincidental curiosity, or might it be developed to become intrinsic to the form, character, content and course of our research?²⁶ Likewise rather than being skeptical of lyrical uses of language or paint (evidenced in Doig and Pater) this thesis sees the lyrical as evidence of, and again intrinsic to, a specific method of thinking, an embodiment which I hope that this writing also enacts. We are used to thinking about painting and creative writing in these terms, as expressions of content through composition not just depiction, but the form or style of academic or critical writing is less commonly considered in terms of its ability to do research in its own right.

In chapter 4 the process of writing Michael Simpson’s paintings and Gertrude Stein’s writing into relation felt different again. It was characterised by an awkwardness and inflexibility that I struggled to negotiate. It involved a shuttling between forms and ideas that sometimes felt in tune and at others prickly, obstreperous and defiant. Once again, the form and character of the works I was researching seemed to be affecting the form and character of the chapter. My subjectivity, as expressed through style and tone, is at once transformed by the material it addresses and transforms the material itself through the particularity of its pairings and its discursive encounter with them.

²⁴ Irving Howe, ‘The New York Intellectuals’, in *Irving Howe: Selected Writings 1950–1990* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, 1990), p. 273.

²⁵ James Penner, ‘Gendering Susan Sontag’s Criticism in the 1960s: the New York Intellectuals, the Counter Culture, and the Kulturkampf over ‘the New Sensibility’’, *Women’s Studies*, 37 (2008), p. 933.

²⁶ Richard Shiff, *Doubt* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 11.

In essaying Simpson's and Stein's attunement chapter 4 is characterised by greater fragmentation and experimentation than the previous chapters. Instead of the fluidities and confluences which mark chapter 3, chapter 4 is streaked through with juxtaposition. Stein and Simpson's contiguities appear as a series of frieze-framed analogies due to their comparable treatment of paint and words through which similar aesthetic mannerisms reverberate. I present these in list-like formations, echoing the types of compressed perspectival arrangements and terse renditions present in their work. As such language comes increasingly under pressure, evidenced in another aspect of the chapter: the possibility and difficulty of articulating and translating an experience – of an artwork or a text or both at once – into words.

The results of these essays are inevitably imperfect but the process by which they are investigated registers the effects of looking and thinking and writing between, across and sometimes even awry. In my mind's eye, they function as experiments in bringing disparate works together and seeing what happens when the relationships of such pairings are given time to prove. What I referred to earlier as their function as a means to 'generate ideas, an exploratory performance of research through the act of writing' also stands in relation to chapter 1 which is not so much a 'case study' but closer to a more conventional (in this case anti-) methodological chapter. But even here, chapter 1's trajectory is improvisatory; it forms the site of various encounters with and between art historians, philosophers and literary critics of its own, but it also grounds some of the approaches to thinking about and generating the material that appears in subsequent chapters.

Though separate, with their own distinct feel, the following chapters are not, therefore, entirely autonomous. It is the nature of, what might be called, 'morphological thinking' to allow multi-directional links to cluster between and around them. This is how conversations emerge, and resonances appear and cross-fertilise, often through detours. One such detour that is worth pointing out, is the way the previous two sentences resonate with instances of Wai Chee Dimock's turns of phrase. Dimock, who I will refer to at various points throughout this thesis, describes her take on literary history, for

example, as the result of ‘site-specific input generating a variable morphology’.²⁷ Her metaphorically inflected creative thinking around literary history sees her modelling, what she calls, a ‘diachronic historicism’ ‘on the traveling frequencies of sound’ that are suggestive of ‘the traveling frequencies of literary texts: frequencies received and amplified across time, moving farther and farther from their points of origin, causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places’.²⁸

To continue borrowing from Dimock, these chapters set in motion just such ‘unexpected vibrations’. Vibrating pairings – which often, incidentally, through their writing turn into clusters – inhabit each chapter which can be read separately, but they also work together, receiving, feeding-back, amplifying, their resonant frequencies overlaying and building up a particular approach to looking and thinking between art, writing and history. Tom McCarthy frames the matter of writing and reading literature in similar terms, as a form of audio synthesis. In *Transmission and the Individual Remix* (2012) he promotes a form of reading that pays heed ‘to a set of signals that have been repeating, pulsing, modulating in the airspace of the novel, poem, play – in their lines, between them and around them—since each of these forms began’.²⁹

‘Repeating, pulsing and modulating’ are strong features in all of these chapters; they are a way of probing, turning over, returning and adding to ideas that swarm and resonate around the space of this thesis, a way of practicing and elucidating the possibilities at stake in its approach. Each chapter should, as I will discuss, be understood as extended essays, literal trials or attempts at seeing what happens if two things – that do not necessarily, historically, geographically or causally belong together – are allowed to meet, to sit, or be together. How does our understanding of them alter? And what kind of unexpected discussions emerge from them?

²⁷ Wai Chee Dimock, ‘Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W. B. Yeats’, *Critical Inquiry*, 39(4) (2013), p. 737.

²⁸ Dimock, ‘Theory of Resonance’, *PMLA*, 112(5) (1997), p. 1061.

²⁹ Tom McCarthy, *Transmission and the Individual Remix: How Literature Works* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2012).

Chapter 1

Thinking Around a Poetic Art History

One potential problem with the approach taken in this thesis is the question of where it fits with the wider discipline of Art History. A discussion of Matthew Rampley's article 'The Poetics of the Image: Art History and the Rhetoric of Interpretation' (2008) serves as a device to outline points of potential friction sparked by how I navigate the material that emerges through this thesis, since the lyrical and imagistic strategies for handling art histories taken here in some respects ally with his examples.³⁰ Rampley discusses the impact that the poetic approaches of Roberto Longhi, Adrian Stokes, Mieke Bal, and Georges Didi-Huberman have had on art history. He sees theirs as alternatives to the 'scientific methods' of doing art history which 'bury the artwork in a formidable apparatus of dry scholarly analysis that robs it of its specificity to such an extent that its cultural and aesthetic value become lost' resulting in an unwelcome 'taming' – a sentiment that this thesis shares.³¹

Though describing the work of these poetic art histories as 'striking', 'remarkable', 'novel', 'important', and even 'astonishing' Rampley remains skeptical, the reasons for which are revealing. He is unconvinced by Bal's assumption that 'one's *own* subjective position can [...] be rendered transparent', leading him to judge her observations as 'having little relevance to the discipline'.³² He sees Didi-Huberman's determination not to attempt to elucidate the uncertainty of the image through a systematic approach to interpretation as offering no 'theory of interpretation at all, but rather, an account of aesthetic experience'.³³ He sees Stokes's writing as 'too individual, too rooted in his personal aesthetic absorption in stone for it to serve as a means of constructing a shared community of knowledge'. And he objects to the way that Longhi's descriptions are

³⁰ Rampley, 'Poetics'.

³¹ Rampley, 'Poetics', p. 7. We will come back to the idea of 'taming' art in chapter 2 in relation to Susan Sontag.

³² I will come to the idea of transparency of subjectivity shortly when I will argue that subjectivity as a(n anti-) methodological approach is not an imposition of itself onto some exterior form but a state of immanence as the activity of writing is being carried out. See Giovanni Gentile in my later discussion of subjectivity, in particular Gentile's notion of how 'humanity thinks, speaks and yearns, and by thinking it thinks itself and all the rest into being' and that 'this is so because, in practice, the individual is not conceivable outside the relationship in which the object of experience is indissolubly linked to the subject of experience. The two are linked through the act of thought by which experience is mediated and realized', Gentile, 'Basic Concepts of Actualism', *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni in Gentile Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield eds., Gentile essays trans. Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield, 20(1–2) (2014), pp. 348 and 345 and Rampley, 'Poetics', p.18.

³³ Rampley, 'Poetics', p. 24.

‘rooted in a highly subjective aesthetic response which can neither be challenged nor confirmed’ and cannot, therefore, ‘serve as a prompt for further historical investigation.’³⁴

Rampley’s critique turns on two cruxes: The first is that though these poetic forms of writing are acts of resistance against ‘the deadening grid of systematic analysis that has been such a central force within so much art historical discourse’ they fail to posit an alternative.³⁵ The second is split into two related parts. On the one hand it is founded on Rampley’s idea of the type of knowledge to which art-historical writing *should* give rise. But it also leads to a questioning of the relationship between the personal nature of responses and/or interpretation and their *usefulness* for the collective labour of the discipline.³⁶

According to Rampley his exemplars fail to offer an alternative mode of discourse to that which they seek to subvert.³⁷ They are evidence of individual anomalies but their importance to the future of art history is limited because they have not spawned sufficient followers. He concludes:

Considering the four authors I have examined, it appears while the weaknesses within art history are exposed, constructing a counter discourse creates as many difficulties as it solves. The image remains ‘tamed’, albeit in a different way. What does emerge out of this discussion is the need to consider not simply the contribution of individual authors, but also more fundamental issues to do with the status of art history as a shared enterprise and the implications that might have for a critical assessment of how art historical knowledge

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 16. My emphases. Per Jonas Nordhagen argues for a reevaluation of the persistent characterisation of Longhi as ‘a late survivor of a long-since extinct race of gentleman amateur, with his endless introvert musings and his purple passages’, in ‘Roberto Longhi (1890–1970) and the Concept of the Connoisseur’, in Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf and Dan Karlholm eds. *Subjectivity and Methodology in Art History* (Eidos 8. Skrifter från Konstvetenskapliga institutionen vid Stockholms universitet, 2003), p. 100.

³⁵ The cause of this ‘deadening grid of systematic analysis’ Rampley puts down to the scientific or ‘wissenschaftlich’ impetus of the Vienna School from the late of Art History from 1870s onwards. Rampley, ‘Poetics’, p. 8.

³⁶ Among other things this thesis will draw out analogies between the ‘subjective’ tendencies of such accounts and a growing interest in embodied critiques in contemporary scholarship, as my discussion of Walter Pater in chapter 3 will show.

³⁷ Rampley, ‘Poetics’, pp. 11–18.

is generated, what 'knowledge' in this context means, and to whom it is addressed.³⁸

The tug of historical legitimacy lingers in this passage; Rampley cannot shake off the question of whether or not his exemplars' claims can be substantiated by historical evidence.³⁹ This sense emerges in various ways. Firstly, phrases like 'serve as a prompt', 'serve as a means of', and referring to art history as 'a collective enterprise' position the writing of art history as if it were a service, to be capitalised – through argument and elucidation – and serving as, above all, a useful marketable exchange.⁴⁰ Language is framed as a vehicle for conveyance rather than as valuable in its own right. Secondly, because of their subjective aesthetic responses poetic art histories 'end up having little relevance' or are 'deeply problematic' because, especially in the case of Stokes and Longhi, they 'can be neither challenged nor confirmed'.⁴¹ And thirdly, Rampley turns the argument around suggesting the exemplars themselves conduct a taming – comparable to that resulting from scientific models of art history – whereby, 'No longer lost in the hermeneutic jargon of [scientific] art history, they become lost in another kind of discourse, in which the language of representation blots out the object of discourse.'⁴² Here 'the language of representation', that is, the language of discourse and its articulating subject, is pitted in opposition to 'the object of discourse'. This thesis, however, sees the two, or rather three strands – object, subject, and language – not in competition, vying for prominence, but at various points in step, or converging.

But what constitutes poetry or the poetic? Michael Oakeshott defines it as the 'activity of making images of a certain kind and moving about among them in a manner appropriate to their character.'⁴³ This 'moving about among' visual and verbal images

³⁸ *ibid.*, pp.10 and 26.

³⁹ A similar objection is made by Rampley in his argument against citing adaptive mutation as the cause for origins of art in his introduction to *The Seductions of Darwin: Art, Evolution, Neuroscience*, (Pennsylvania: Penn. State University Press, 2017).

⁴⁰ Rampley, 'Poetics', pp. 17 and 25.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 25.

⁴³ Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1959), p. 31.

‘in a manner appropriate to their character’ is just what this thesis essays.⁴⁴ Identifying such appropriateness of character involves a process in which multiple strands need careful and simultaneous attendance: negotiating the felt experience of close seeing and reading; maintaining the connection between words and images that suggest themselves in the moment of writing; following those relationships to test how far they take us; and regarding the words through which those relationships emerge as enmeshed and illuminative in their own right.

It does so by means of comparison, nothing new there but a development of the Renaissance activity of *paragone*.⁴⁵ The term comparison, however, is too leaden, too absolute, too dichotomous to encompass the nature of the relationships between texts and images that I am proposing. The term emergence better captures their unfurling resonances and resemblances. Analogies gather here, falteringly, suggesting themselves as words on these pages congregate. The aim of this thesis is to listen to the emergence of these ideas and observe their conversing across subjects, disciplines and time.

What enables this emergence is its open regard to subjectivity. In a 1969 letter to James Ackerman published in *Daedalus*, Leo Steinberg declares how he ‘admire[s] the art historian who lets the ground of his private involvement show. Though we all hope to reach objectively valid conclusions’, he concedes, ‘this purpose is not served by disguising the subjectivity of interest, method, and personal history that in fact conditions our work.’⁴⁶ I take this idea further to encompass how the language of an encounter, that comes about in the form of mutual affective experiences between subjects and objects, may also let the process of its involvement show. The language that sets itself down here, one depression of the keyboard at a time, is meant to form part of the conversation, it is held alongside the words and images and ideas of its other participants. I seek not to disguise how this thesis came into being, but to foreground the inherent contingency of its encounters.

⁴⁴ The use of the phrase ‘in a certain manner’ is an explicit reference to Aristotle, *Poetics*, i 7-8 ix. 2.

⁴⁵ My reference to *paragone* is intended only to acknowledge the lineage of the methods I am employing. The following pairings are deployed, not as comparisons or a means of championing one media over another, but as confluences in which reciprocal analogies between media and modes of expression emerge.

⁴⁶ Leo Steinberg, ‘Objectivity and the Shrinking Self’, *Daedalus*, 98 (1969), p. 826.

Put like this it recalls Oakeshott's eulogising of scholarship, research and writing not as a service, as my reading of Rampley's article suggests, but as a more open pursuit, akin to a metaphorical conversation. Scholarship, Oakeshott writes, is not 'an enterprise designed to yield extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis'.⁴⁷ It is not (or should not be) a process of oneupmanship. Nor is it necessarily a process whereby, in this case, texts and images are explained or interpreted in order to bring about greater clarity. Oakeshott's model allows for 'different universes of discourse [to] meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship'.⁴⁸ He envisions scholarship as something like a stage on which a series of intellectual discussions enter, meet, attract, repel and sometimes, though not necessarily, merge, echo, and even cross-fertilise. Scholarship, played out like this, in and through conversation, poses considerable risks; it is, as Oakeshott puts it, 'an unrehearsed intellectual adventure'.⁴⁹

Conversation and 'Poetic Imagining'

There are precedents for foregrounding conversation in scholarship including Plato's *Dialogues* (fourth century BC), François Fénelon's, *Dialogues of the Dead* (c. 1690), and Walter Landor's *Imaginary Conversations* (1824-1829) conducted between historical and mythical characters ranging from Ancient Greece to the Romantic period; Maurice Blanchot's notoriously difficult *Infinite Conversation* (1969); Jacques Derrida's 'Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing' (1978), a text that sways between prose and conversation conducted between indeterminate interlocutors; and Matthew Collings's 'An Oral History of Western Art' in *ArtReview* (2008 onwards), a series of imaginary conversations with historical figures. But the character of the hypothetical discourses enacted here are more akin to the spirit of Oakeshott's conversation as actively reflective and reflexive. That last phrase, actively reflective and reflexive, should not be construed as oxymoronic since 'contemplating' is to enact 'a specific

⁴⁷ Oakeshott, *The Voice of Poetry*, p. 10.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 11.

mode of imagining and moving about among images'.⁵⁰ Conversation is the mode through which we contemplate 'poetic imagining'. Artists, writers and philosophers, Oakeshott argues, 'are not doing *two* things – observing, thinking, remembering, hearing, feeling etc. and then 'expressing' or making analogues, imitations, or reproductions of what they have seen, heard, remembered, felt etc. in the practical world, and doing it well or ill, correctly or incorrectly – they are doing *one* thing, imagining poetically.'⁵¹

The way that this imagining emerges is key. Personal experiences tell us that conversations are often serendipitous: an exchange with a fellow dog owner, a misunderstanding with a partner, a throwaway aside to a colleague. They are rarely structured, even if content and tone is planned they often take on a life and direction of their own. Conversations arise. This thesis turns on just such an emergence of remote elements that gather together, apparently naturally or at least unbidden. Artist and writer Agnieszka Kurant characterises emergence as a resistance to 'computation and predicting'. She continues, 'the complex systems within which emergence occurs – from termite colonies to social movements and cities, from the human to the Internet, manifest nonlinear, unpredictable behaviours that nevertheless produce novel and coherent structures and patterns'.⁵² In attending to the 'non-linear, unpredictable' elements clustering here I am less concerned with why the pairings in this thesis come together than with *how* they do so, and what the implications of their doing so are for further thinking between visual art and writing.⁵³ This is another way in which my

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 39. I will return to the idea of the simultaneity of this position in the section that follows entitled 'Practice-based Research'. Here I argue for a type of art-historical writing that is both performed and informative, practical and theoretical, active and reflective.

⁵² Agnieszka Kurant, 'Uncomputables', *Cabinet*, 61 (Spring-Summer 2016), p. 51.

⁵³ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a broad account of Associationism. See James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, Alexander Bain, Andrew Findlater, and George Grote critical notes, John Stuart Mill ed., vol. 2 (London: Longman, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1869); David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations, etc.* (London: J. Johnson, 1791); David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, second edition 1978, online edition 2014); Dugald Stewart, *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind in Works of Dugald Stewart, in Seven Volumes*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Hillard and Brown, 1829); James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (London, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U.P, 1981); Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Cairns Craig, *Associationism and the Literary Imagination: From the Phantasmal Chaos* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol. I (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1848).

thesis negotiates the potential accusation of solipsism. By foregrounding the process of thinking through how a resonance is triggered rather than what a particular resonance might be, claims of relativism or universal irrelevance dissipate.

Art History as Practice

To expand on that thought, let me return to one of Rampley's principle concerns which was the apparent lack of knowledge to which poetic art histories give rise. In the context of a doctoral thesis which may be expected to yield new knowledge this is pertinent. The fact that this project straddles a conventional humanities research PhD and a practice-led PhD, however, goes some way to mitigate such concerns but only if we first understand what is at stake in the two approaches.

The model for a practice-led PhD varies widely across disciplines and institutions, but some consensus is emerging as to their key characteristics. Not only does the practical element form a large part of these submissions, practice also leads the research process so that, according to Robin Nelson, 'theory and practice are "imbricated within each other" in praxis'.⁵⁴ James Elkins identifies three common characteristics of practice-led doctorates:

- A mode of conception that is at once active and self-reflexive.
- An implicit centrality of the body and phenomenological mode of inquiry.
- And the suggestion of a framework which allows for the production of new insights.⁵⁵

Hazel Smith and Roger Dean emphasise the inherent interconnectedness of practice-led research, and its foregrounding of process as in a state of becoming.⁵⁶ And Brad Haseman and Daniel Mafe describe such research as 'unruly, ambiguous, and marked

⁵⁴ Practice-led PhDs are also called Practice-based PhDs or more broadly as Practice as Research. For further discussion of the appropriateness of these labels see Robin Nelson ed., *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 9, 10, and 62.

⁵⁵ James Elkins, 'Artists with PhDs: Debates About the New Studio Art Doctoral Degree', *Academia .edu* <http://www.academia.edu/168372Artists_with_PhDs_On_the_New_Doctoral_Degree_in_Studio_Art_opening> [accessed 22 November 2013].

⁵⁶ Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean, 'Introduction: Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice – Towards the Iterative Cyclic Web', in *Practice-led Research Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, Smith and Dean eds., (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

by extremes of interpretative anxiety for the reflexive researcher'. It is this way Haseman and Mafe argue, 'because it is deeply emergent in nature'.⁵⁷

Perhaps most contested is the degree to which such PhDs produce and demonstrate new 'knowledge' which is especially relevant given Rampley's critique of poetic art histories. So what constitutes knowledge? According to Nelson the inflection of this discussion requires some rethinking. We should not, he argues, be referring to what knowledge these PhDs produce, instead we should be asking ourselves what types of knowledge, or rather 'knowing' arise from them. It is an important distinction which Nelson clarifies using philosopher David Pears's example of riding a bike:

I know how to ride a bicycle, but I cannot say how I balance because I have no method. I may know that certain muscles are involved, but that factual knowledge comes later, if at all, and it could hardly be used in instruction.⁵⁸

Nelson's conception of knowing depends on a distinction between quantitative and qualitative research. The former is a data-based knowledge which he says is founded on deductive methods of research developed in the natural sciences and closely aligned with positivist methodologies. Qualitative research, which emerged as a form of resistance to quantitative methodologies, is inductive and embraces a variety of methods of research.⁵⁹ Quantitative research is widely characterised as strong and stable, dealing in hard knowledge and data while qualitative research is defined as 'softer', more

⁵⁷ Brad Haseman and Daniel Mafe, 'Acquiring Know-How: Research Training for Practice-led Researchers', in *Practice-led Research*, Smith and Dean eds., p. 220. There is a huge body of literature on the matter of emergence usually coming out of the Social Sciences but increasingly in relation to Art Practice, including but not limited to: Haseman and Mafe, 'Acquiring Know-How'; Paul Corning, 'The Re-Emergence of "Emergence": The Venerable Concept in Search of a Theory', *Complexity*, 7 (6) (2002); Raymond A. Eve, Sara Horsfall, Mary E. Lee, eds., *Chaos, Complexity, and Sociology: Myths, Models, and Theories* (California, London, New Delhi: Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, 1997); Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy eds., *Handbook of Emergent Methods* (New York: Guilford Press, 2010).

⁵⁸ David Pears, following Heidegger's notion of material thinking, cited in Nelson, *Practice as Research*, p. 9.

⁵⁹ Patricia Leavy also frames the narrative relationship between the two research paradigms in this way in *Method Meets Art* (New York: Guilford Press, 2015), p. 8. Nelson takes the work of Newton and Comte as being representative of quantitative knowledge based on their belief in the certainties of scientific research methods and findings. The qualitative method is espoused by thinkers like Einstein, Heisenberg, Plank and others *Practice as Research*, 2013, p. 49. See Brad Haseman for an interesting complication of the dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative research, 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, 118 (2006), p. 97.

‘fluid’, leading to ‘soft knowledge’ and often retains some ambiguity.⁶⁰ I will return to, and revise, the valuative connotations of terms like soft, fluid, weak, and even leaky in relation to research at various points in this thesis.⁶¹

In aligning itself between a research and a practice-led PhD, this thesis intends to dissolve the binary modes by which academia, traditionally, sets scholarly subjects against ‘creative’ practices. Take the discipline variously, and unsatisfactorily, described as fictocriticism, creative criticism, creative non-fiction, reformative criticism, post-criticism, anarcho-scholasticism, Other criticism, and philosophic criticism.⁶² The model for assessing such theses is to separate, artificially and unsatisfactorily, practice from criticism or theory. The 2016 conference ‘Hybrid Writing: Literature as Criticism, Criticism as Literature’, organised by the department of Creative Writing at University of East Anglia, was bristling with frustrations, voiced by speakers and audience alike, about the misleading severance of creativity from criticism as if the creative could not be critical and the critical not creative.⁶³ This thesis, by contrast, is inflected with the

⁶⁰ Nelson, *Practice as Research*, pp. 52–62. Of course, some of the distinctions between the qualitative and quantitative draw on basic distinctions drawn in the German debate of the nineteenth-century between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*.

⁶¹ See Dimock, ‘Weak Theory’, and her use of the term ‘leaky’ which is discussed in chapter 3 in relation to Peter Doig and Walter Pater’s fluidity. See also Michaela Atienza’s discussion of the inherent ‘instability’ of fictocriticism ‘Strange Technology: Fictocriticism and the Cyborg’, *Journal of English and Comparative Literature*, 14(1) (2014), p. 59. And Helen Flavell’s definition of fictocriticism in *Writing-between: Australian and Canadian Ficto-criticism* (Diss. Murdoch University, 2004), pp. 30–31.

⁶² Interesting examples include, but are not limited to: Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic As Artist’, in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine and Co., 1891); Jean Cocteau, ‘The Essay of Indirect Criticism’, T. and R. Weiss eds., *Quarterly Review of Literature*, 12(4) (1964); Jackie Stacey and Janet Wolff, *Writing Otherwise: Experiments in Cultural Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Bruce Hainley, *Under the Sign of [sic]: Sturtevant’s Volte-face* (South Pasadena: Semiotexte, 2013). For other twentieth and twenty-first century examples see the excellent: Stephen Benson and Clare Connors eds., *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) which includes Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (London: Vintage, 2002); Wayne Koestenbaum, *Hotel Theory* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2007). See also Ali Smith, *Artful*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012); Mark Wallace and Stephen Marks eds., *Telling It Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001); Carol Mavor, *Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of Camera Lucida, La Jetée, Sans Soleil, and Hiroshima mon Amour* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012). Another relevant variant of this genre of hybrid writing is Ethnographic Fiction, see S. Marston and S. de Leeuw, ‘Creativity and Geography: Toward a Politicized Intervention’, *The Geographical Review*, 103(2) (2013); J. Wylie, ‘A single day’s walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30(2) (2005).

⁶³ ‘Hybrid Writing: Literature as Criticism, Criticism as Literature’ (University of East Anglia, 17 December, 2016). From the conference papers, note especially Tania Hershman, ‘What if we were all allowed to separate and come together’ (2016), Meryl Pugh, ‘Against Cohering – Or Why the Bluebell is a Poor Analogy for the Literary-Critical text’ (2016) and Anna Metcalfe “I hope to show”, or the Last Thing out of Pandora’s Box’ (2016).

openness of a practice-led PhD but without the artificial separation of theory or methodology from practice. Here theory is practice; practice is theory.

To the question of what this kind of hybrid approach to research and writing can yield fictocritic Michela Atienza provides a tantalising, if unresolved, response. She calls for a sharpening of focus not just on the ways that fictocriticism ‘deviates from the academic writing tradition [...] but on its fusion with another form of writing.’⁶⁴ Atienza sees a ‘mutation’ of the two modes from which fictocriticism borrows (creative/fiction and criticism) to ‘allow us to say “something else”’.⁶⁵ This thesis intends to set up the conditions in which this ‘something else’ might thrive.

Art Transhistorically

Recurrent patterns of thought emerge from this thesis. One is the historically disparate nature of the works that come into contact. In fact, very early on in my project I thought that I might focus on the philosophical implications of transhistorical or anachronistic connections that I had begun to make between the work of writers and artists. But as the thesis developed, this element became more of an observation than a developed topic in its own right. I give it its own subsection here though partly, to acknowledge the significant frissons and implications of such transhistorical pairings, and partly to acknowledge the self-contained potential for this element of my thesis to be developed further in the future. I will, therefore, say only a few words about its role in the subsequent chapters.

The purpose of bringing historically, geographically, and in most other ways disparate objects into orbit in these case studies is to give time and value to perceived, but incidentally ahistorical associations. My chapters attempt to write through, as precisely as possible, how texts and images partake in shared conversations even without their knowing. Accordingly they engage with a recent shift in scholarship – enabled by reception studies though departing from it in crucial ways – which argues for the value

⁶⁴ Atienza, ‘Strange Technology’, p. 42.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 43.

of drawing scholarly comparisons between artworks across substantial lengths of time, a shift exemplified in the works of Mieke Bal, Elizabeth Prettejohn, Amy Powell Knight, Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood.⁶⁶ Rather than identifying influences between artworks, or seeing the modern or contemporary in the old or vice versa, the transhistorical dialogues I draw on see conversations between artworks that might appear entirely separate (whose original artistic or cultural functions were different or whose origins are temporally and geographically mismatched) but that, in various ways, appear to speak analogically and associatively across the temporal span that, on the surface, divides them.

The strength of what is sometimes termed an anachronic approach to framing art-historical relationships brings to the fore a series of overlapping qualities peculiar to the study of artworks. Close attention to the artwork highlights the way that they contain within them, and their encounters, networks of relations with other artworks. Some have termed this ‘promiscuity’, a capacity to relate to different things at different times.⁶⁷ My approach, however, is distinct for the way that it combines the anachronic with the associative. It is a technique more developed in literary spheres but Aby Warburg and his *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–29) constitutes an important example from art history. But this thesis is also cognisant of the problematics of such (non-)systems of mapping knowledge or understanding. It wonders, but does not answer, questions about how we reconcile, for example, the danger of flattening out difference in the homogenous

⁶⁶ On reception studies see Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Wolfgang Iser, *A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas, *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Maldon and Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). On transhistorical studies see, Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Paul Crowther, *The Transhistorical Image: Philosophizing Art and its History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010); Alexander Nagel, *Medieval Modern: Art out of Time* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012); Amy Knight Powell, *Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012); Christopher Wood, ‘Reception and the Classics’, in W. Brockliss, P. Chaudhuri, A. Haimson Lushkov, and K. Wasdin eds., *Reception and the Classics: An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Hal Foster, ‘Preposterous Timing’, *London Review of Books*, 34(21) (8 November 2012); Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture: Greek Sculpture and Modern Art from Winckelmann to Picasso* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2005); and Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps: histoire de l’art et anachronisme des images* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2000).

⁶⁷ Knight Powell, *Depositions*, p. 263.

subjects of art history while also not holing ourselves up in closed boxes of art-historical periodisation? And what do transhistorical connections or analogies tell us about the artworks and art historians in question?

The Essay

There is a sense of precariousness in making transhistorical connections, however, a sense which is conveyed in part by my choice to refer to the chapters that follow as case studies and also essays. Having explained my use of the term ‘case study’, the ‘essay’ also deserves some unpacking as it connects to a genre of writing often characterised by a specific character of thought to which this thesis is sympathetic. Due to its relativity, transience, and perceived insufficient originality or rigour, Theodor Adorno, in 1958, identified the essay’s lack of status as one of its defining features. He posited the essay as in diametric opposition to the qualities associated with scholarly writing.⁶⁸ Here, I put forward the essay as itself a form of scholarly thought. So when Rampley critiques poetic art histories for their lack of clearly stated methodology in the name of the ‘shared enterprise’ of scholarship we might turn to Adorno for an alternative perspective. Adorno writes that the essay ‘draws the fullest conclusions from the critique of systems’. It is its non-methodology that marks the essay out as distinctive and uniquely valuable. He sees this absence of systems as being ‘radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character’.⁶⁹ The essay ‘thinks conjointly and in freedom about things that meet in its freely chosen object’ as if it had a mind of its

⁶⁸ My paraphrasing of Adorno here is loose. His words are: ‘the academic guild accepts as philosophy only what is clothed in the dignity of the universal – and today perhaps the originary.’ ‘The Essay as Form’, in *Notes of Literature*, Rolf Tiedemann ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 3.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 9.

own.⁷⁰ It starts to take on the characteristics of a living organism which is responsive to and metabolises the distinct elements that it brings together through discussion. The following essays should be seen as examples of just such thinking ‘conjointly and in freedom’ with the artworks and texts around which they roam. They set up a series of distinct, speculative landscapes through which encounters with objects take place.⁷¹

Types of Subjectivity

A characteristic of both the essay and ficto- or creative criticism is their self-conscious enlisting of the subjectivity of the writer to enact their relationships with research through language.⁷² Because subjectivity is inherently amorphous and notoriously difficult to define, I want to be clear about the type of subjectivity at play here by first setting out what it is not. This is not an embrace of Epicurean thought in which all

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 11. There is an enormous body of literature on the essay but among the most useful are: Phillip Lopate, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (Peterborough: Anchor Books, 1994); Claire de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism, and the Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Carl Klaus, *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010); Patricia Foster and Jeff Porter eds., *Understanding The Essay* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2012); Carl Klaus and Ned Stuckey eds., *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012); Réda Bensmaïa ed., *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*, Pat Fedkiew trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (New York: Routledge, 1988); G. Douglas Atkins, *Estranging the Familiar: Toward a Revitalized Critical Writing* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2008); Atkins, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth* (University of Georgia Press, Athens, GA: 2005); Jill Talbot ed., *Metawritings: Toward a Theory of Nonfiction* (University of Iowa Press, 2012); David Lazar, *Essaying the Essay* (Gettysburg, PA: Welcome Table Press, 2014); David Lazar ed., *Truth in Nonfiction: Essays* (University of Iowa Press, 2008); Virginia Woolf, ‘The Modern Essay’, *The Common Reader*, Vol. 1 (London: Vintage, 2003); Jean Starobinski, ‘Can One Define the Essay?’, in *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Time*, Carl Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French eds. (Iowa: Iowa University Press, 2012); Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ‘f-Words: An Essay on the Essay’, *American Literature*, 68(1) (1996); R. Lane Kauffman, ‘The Skewed Path: Essaying as Un-Methodical Method’, *Diogenes*, 36 (1988). See also Pater’s description of essays as containing ‘much of accident in this essentially informal, this un-methodical method’, in *Plato and Platonism* (London: Aeterna Press, 2012). Other examples of hard to categorise essayists include, Maggie Nelson, Wayne Koestenbaum, and John D’Agata, Eliot Weinberger, Lydia Davis.

⁷¹ My use of the term ‘landscape’ here is indebted to Steven Connors’s account of Michel Serres’s thought which he describes in terms of ‘topologies’, in ‘Serres and the Shape of Thought’ paper presented at ‘Literature and Science’ conference held in Ascoli Piceno, Italy 20–22 May 2002. It appears in *Anglistik*, 15 (2004) and <http://www.stevenconnor.com/topologies/> [accessed 2 December 2018].

⁷² See Michael Ann Holly and Marquard Smith eds., *What Is Research in the Visual Arts?* (Williamstown MA.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008); Dana Arnold ed., *Art History: Contemporary Perspectives on Method* (Maldon and Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010) and Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson eds., *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Eleni Gemtou, ‘Subjectivity in Art History and Art Criticism’, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 2(1) (2010); Lagerlöf and Karlholm, *Subjectivity and Methodology*.

sense-perceptions are considered true.⁷³ But it also seeks not to dismiss such positions either. A more nuanced claim might be to say that all sense-perceptions, when shared and offered up to discussion, are worthy of further attention. If, after further inquiry, that sense-perception still holds – in that its articulation in words still convinces or compels – then perhaps it might be claimed to be true or, at least, of interest, inducing further thought, sense-perceptions, and associative connections. What the resulting value of these observations might be is less easy to anticipate; they are ‘site-specific’, as Dimock has it, and therefore inextricably linked with the particular landscape of research from which they emerge.⁷⁴ What is absolutely clear is that, in order to gauge their value, sense-perceptions first need a thorough airing.

A tangential look at Panofsky’s uncertain attitude to the role of subjectivity helps anchor our understanding of the type of subjectivity at play here. In ‘History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline’ (1955) he claims, on the surface at least, to recognise the value of subjectivity, though he suggests separating our ‘intuitive aesthetic re-creation’ (present subjective accounts) of objects and our ‘rational archaeological analysis’ (objective recovery of past events). The subjective and objective – which Panofsky also affiliates with another classic binary, art and science – seem to coexist since the professional art historian should be ‘continually checking the results of his archeological research against the evidence of his re-creative experiences’.⁷⁵ But the two interpretative modes ‘interpenetrate’ in Panofsky’s mind: one does not succeed the other in temporal or qualitative terms. It is not a question of ‘first buying a ticket [metaphor for subjective experience] and then boarding a train [doing objective research]’.⁷⁶

⁷³ See Gisela Striker, *Essays in Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 77–91; K.M. Vogt, ‘All Sense-Perceptions Are True: Epicurean Responses to Skepticism and Relativism’, in J. Lezra and L. Blake eds., *Lucretius and Modernity. The New Antiquity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁷⁴ Dimock, ‘Weak Theory’, p. 737.

⁷⁵ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (London: Peregrine Books, 1970), p. 41.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 39.

This sense of the interpenetration of modes is crucial here. It partly accounts for the way that the thesis distinguishes itself from autobiographic and confessional writings.⁷⁷ I am sympathetic to Rampley's frustration with the flavour of Adrian Stokes's writing that is so closely bound to his own childhood, thereby barring the reader from the discussion.⁷⁸ The problem with subjectivity when used to this end is its tendency towards a closed-circuit instrumentalisation: one's position in society accounts for the direction of one's research. In such instances it becomes a means for determining the rational bases for choices in research, a kind of anterior logic or justification for your field of and approach to research.

I will take a short detour in order to demonstrate how this thesis deviates from other examples of art-historical approaches in which subjectivity acts as an active agent. In the 2003 publication *Subjectivity and Methodology in Art History* contributions by Keith Moxey and Lena Johannesson make use of just such explicitly autobiographical modes, though each comes at them from different angles. Moxey attempts to help his readers' understanding of 'the perspective that informs [his] writing' while Johannesson deploys her personal experiences as stimuli from which her research develops.⁷⁹ In both cases, the employment of the autobiographical subjectivist strategy tends toward the reductive. Moxey traces the reasons for the shape of and 'investment' in his research back to his South American background.⁸⁰ He attempts to identify definitively the reasons for his scholarly peregrinations while also recognising the incompleteness of his perspective. He knows that 'neither the discursive practices that have formed [him] nor the nature of [his] own intervention in those practices of history writing is transparently available to [him]'.⁸¹ His convictions lead him to conclude that 'autobiographic self-fictions [...] can serve as a means of creating effective narratives of persuasion'. His

⁷⁷ See Suzanne Preston Blier, 'Autobiography and Art History: The Imperative of Peripheral Vision', *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 39 (Spring 2001); Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facemement', *Modern Language Notes*, 94 (1979); James Olney, *Metaphors of the Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁷⁸ Rampley, 'Poetics', p. 16. And also Carrier, 'Erwin Panofsky, Leo Steinberg, David Carrier', p. 346.

⁷⁹ See Keith Moxey, 'The History of Art after the Death' and Lena Johannesson, 'On "The Irrational Remainder" and the Instrumentalised Ego', in Lagerlöf and Karlholm eds., *Subjectivity and Methodology*.

⁸⁰ Moxey, 'The History of Art after the Death', p. 121.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 120.

deployment of subjective modes are, therefore, primarily instrumentalist (they ‘serve as a means of’) and rhetorical (‘creating effective narrative of persuasion’).⁸²

Conversely Johannesson describes autobiographic subjectivity – or what she calls the ‘intellectually disturbed subjectivity ego’ as opposed to the ‘methodologically trained professional or instrumentalised ego’ – as the ‘primus motor’ for her research. In her handling the ‘biographical’ is just a launch pad to be abandoned once the ultimate goal of unearthing objective professional conclusions has been reached.⁸³ This is Panofsky’s metaphor of ‘first buying a ticket and then boarding a train’ in action.⁸⁴ The problem is that Johannesson’s autobiographic subjective force is premised on a characterisation of subjectivities as irrational, untrustworthy, unprofessional, tendentious or ‘intellectually disturbed’, as she put it, to be constrained within a more logical ‘methodologically trained [and] professional’ discursive analysis.⁸⁵ This kind of inveterate ‘acknowledgment of positionality’ aspires to objectivity through the frame of the subjective and is sharply criticised by Michael Schreyach: ‘You divulge assumptions, prejudices, predilections, tastes, interests, politics, investments’, he writes, in order to see the ‘problems of subjective preference [...] solved, simply because you have acknowledged them’. It is strategic and serves to ‘neutralize anticipated counter-arguments’, and amounts to ‘self-exposure, not self-criticism’.⁸⁶ Such aligning of subjectivity with uncritical self-exposure or solipsism is something I have tried to avoid.

⁸² *ibid.*, p. 123.

⁸³ Johannesson, ‘On the ‘Irrational Remainder’’, pp. 78–79.

⁸⁴ Panofsky, *Meaning* (1970), p. 39.

⁸⁵ Johannesson, ‘On the ‘Irrational Remainder’’, p. 78.

⁸⁶ Michael Schreyach, ‘The Recovery of Art Criticism’, in *The State of Art Criticism*, James Elkins and Michael Newman eds. (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), p. 6.

Despite the non-autobiographic nature of what follows I do employ the personal voice.⁸⁷ Poststructuralist theory has made us wary of subjective accounts due to their inevitable entanglements with the unconscious, the culturally and historically loaded nature of language and the political and social power dynamics bound up in questions of (the semblance of) agency and identity. This awareness has paved the way for fields of scholarship such as Feminist, Queer, and Postcolonial studies.⁸⁸ According to Moxey such fields tend more readily to accept the personal voice because ‘their findings and conclusions are specifically defined as forms of *local* knowledge rather than as pretensions to universality’.⁸⁹ Such an emphasis on the multiplicity of perspectives and narrative readings of art history has been crucial for shaking deep-rooted assumptions about, say, the domination of white male artists and revising American and European dominance, in favour of a more heterogeneous, global picture.⁹⁰ The importance of motivations behind and the implications of such research cannot be overstated, and

⁸⁷ For discussion on the use of the personal voice in academia see the special issue Cathy N. Davidson ‘Critical Fictions: Four Views on the Place of the Personal in Scholarship’, *PMLA*, 111(5) (1996); ‘The Inevitability of the Personal’, Norman N. Holland et al., *PMLA*, 111(5) (1996); Gertrude Himmelfarb, ‘Professor Narcissus: In Today’s Academy, Everything is Personal’, *The Weekly Standard* (June 2, 1997) available at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/professor-narcissus/article/9782> [accessed 3/10/17]; H. Aram Veaser ed., *Confessions of the Critics*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1996); Judith Hallett and Thomas Van Nortwick eds., *Compromising Traditions: The Personal Voice in Classical Scholarship* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁸⁸ For example, Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan trans. (London: Tavistock, 1977); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1972); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Cape, 1972); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1976).

⁸⁹ Moxey, ‘The History of Art after the Death’, p. 110.

⁹⁰ Here I refer obliquely to the New Art Historians but their motivations and intentions differ from mine. Their deeply political and historicist agendas risked losing the ‘art’ from ‘art history’. See Jonathan Harris, *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello, *The New Art History* (London: Camden Press, 1986); Bill Beckley and David Schapiro eds., *Uncontrollable Beauty* (New York: Allworth Press, 1998).

there is clearly much more work to do, but it is a body of literature to which this thesis does not contribute.⁹¹

Subjectivity, as it appears here, is not connected to the vernacular use of the term either. Its casual use tends to value any or all claims about responses to art, giving us the all clear to think and feel whatever we like about art because ‘after all, it’s all subjective’. Such a claim is not just ungrounded but tends at best to lead us nowhere very interesting and at worst, to become entirely meaningless. The nature of our responses must in some way be relatable to, they must trace a particular network of thought. As Margaretha Lagerlöf puts it, ‘if we are to inform our interlocutors about [a] work, we have to stay within the realm of shared experiences’.⁹² There must be some consensus on the references evoked by a work of art or literature. If that consensus is not there already the responder needs to demonstrate the basis of her response. She must convey the configuration of her response in relation to the object, by simultaneously unpacking the physical, emotional, psychological, associational, phenomenological characteristics of the object as they occur to her. But she must also think about the nature of her experience and how it might connect to and bear on other, similar or distinct, experiences. This thesis seeks to do just that.

According to Lagerlöf the importance of subjectivity in the methodological development of art history is greater than for the other humanities: ‘In observing the subjective nuances in art historical examinations,’ she writes, ‘we also need to explore the individual and particular qualities in works of art – qualities we can only try to reach

⁹¹ See Amanda Boetzkes, ‘Phenomenology and Interpretation beyond the Flesh’, in *Art History: Contemporary Perspectives on Method*, p. 34; Amelia Jones, ‘Meaning, Identity and Embodiment: The Uses of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology in Art History’, in Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen eds., *Art and Thought* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008). See also Mary Ann Caws, *Women of Bloomsbury: Virginia, Vanessa and Carrington* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). For examples of scholarship on feminism and autobiography see the excellent, Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and other Autobiographical Acts* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); Shari Penstock ed., *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women’s Autobiographical Writings* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Bella Brodski and Celeste Schenck eds., *Life/Lines: Theorising Women’s Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Rachel Blau du Plessis, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) among many more.

⁹² Lagerlöf, ‘Subjectivity and Methodology in Art History: Introduction’, in *Subjectivity and Methodology*, p. 11.

through language, in testing categorical remarks, in the break up and reformulation of such categories, and ultimately in the changing of typologies'.⁹³ Thus, subjectivity gets to work through the articulation of the artwork in language. As language conveys and recreates subjective responses, often in tandem, it clarifies and distorts, conjoining and distancing experiences in complicated but interesting ways.

The type of subjectivity enacted here, then, turns on simultaneously active and self-reflexive responses to artworks. It is concerned less with what feelings, tastes and opinions are generated by encounters with artworks, and more with how those responses come into being, how they compare to other responses and how they are manifested through writing. Where else do such responses lead us? And what is the nature of the alteration that takes place during the reception, absorption and transmission of images, sensory stimuli, ideas and words? Though the porous relations between experience and research are phenomenologically-charged in this project, I employ the idea of phenomenology as a description of the way in which we relate to the world (and art) on the most basic level, without recourse necessarily to the specialist language of phenomenological philosophy, as I will shortly discuss in relation to Giovanni Gentile.

Subjectivity through Art History

Subjectivity, as we have seen, makes itself felt through social and cultural theory in a whole series of guises, from Psychoanalysis to Feminism, Marxism, Poststructuralism, Humanism and Postmodernism.⁹⁴ As different as these frameworks are they all conceive of subjectivity as manifesting, constituting or reflecting particular cultural, political and social 'positions'. This thesis, however, is less interested in the *position* of the writing subject, either implicit or explicit, than in the process of the writing subject actively metabolising the texture and mood of the relationships that her research materials elicit. It is interested in the ways that subjectivity is reflected through the language that most befits the particularity of each encounter. In its attempts to translate that often non-

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹⁴ Robert Strozier provides a useful overview and history in *Foucault, Subjectivity and Identity. Historical Constructions of Subject and Self* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001) though Strozier's broader concern is with the implications of subjectivity on ethnic identity and societal racism.

verbal experience into words for others to grasp, it simultaneously creates and performs a form of inexact, hard-fought equivalence or documentation.

Outlining some instances of subjective iterations from the historiography of art reveals at once subjectivity's ubiquity and variousness. Its explicit deployment as critical methodology is enacted by writers such as Walter Pater, John Ruskin, Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf.⁹⁵ Subjective judgements in appraisals of style are drawn on by connoisseurs such as Roberto Longhi, Giovanni Morelli, Bernard Berenson and Max Friedländer.⁹⁶ In fact, in passing, it is worth noting that according to Per Jonas Nordhagen, one of the reasons for the rejection of connoisseurial methods in academic scholarship until very recently is precisely connoisseurship's foregrounding of subjectivity: its 'way of approaching art that appears both uncontrollably subjective and strongly ego-directed'.⁹⁷ Stokes's particular breed of art history, as we have already seen, married the psychoanalytic self with autobiography, fiction, and art history.⁹⁸ His embodied, sensuous and situated writing not only acknowledges its subjectivity as a starting point but continues to make imaginative use of it throughout.⁹⁹

In some cases the subjective is characterised as a marker of social or political, rather than personal, 'difference'. The collateral implication of the New Art-Historical drive to make art history engage with 'the real world' during the 1970s and 80s and break from

⁹⁵ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (London and New York: Everyman's Library, 1968); John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vols. 1–5 (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1880); Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies by Charles Baudelaire*, Jonathan Mayne trans. and ed. (New York: Phaidon, 1955); Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, John M. L. Drew ed. (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1992); Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vols. 1 and 2, C. K. Scott-Moncrieff trans. (New York: Random House, 1934); Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

⁹⁶ See M. J. Friedländer, *On Art and Connoisseurship*, Tancred Borenius trans. (London: Bruno Cassirer, 1942); and for a useful overview of connoisseurship see Carol Gibson-Wood, *Studies in the Theory of Connoisseurship from Vasari to Morelli* (New York: Garland, 1988). Longhi is also, of course, one of Rampley's 'poetic' exemplars.

⁹⁷ Nordhagen, 'Roberto Longhi', p. 98.

⁹⁸ Adrian Stokes, *The Quattro Cento and Stones of Rimini* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). Interestingly, in his 1963 essay from 'Painting and the Inner World' Stokes acknowledges how 'indebted' he is to passages from Kenneth Clark's *Landscape into Art*, further calling into question Rampley's argument that these poetic art histories come from nowhere. See *The Image in Form, Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*, Richard Wollheim ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 225.

⁹⁹ Wollheim, 'Introduction', *The Image in Form*, p. 9.

the old establishment paradigms, for example, saw the very particularity of subjectivity subsumed by a more forthright social and political mission. It is somewhat surprising, then, that in his ‘experiment in art writing’ of 2006, T. J. Clark, one of *The New Art History*’s most vociferous contributors, grew tired of the ‘constant, cursory hauling of visual (and verbal) images before the court of political judgement’.¹⁰⁰

More personal, even idiosyncratic, subjectivities come to the fore when art historians register not just their social positions but the particularity of their sensuous and affective relationships with their research interests. Here the work of scholars like Whitney Davis, Richard Shiff, T. J. Clark (more recently), Peter de Bolla, James Elkins, Donald Preziosi, Claire Farago, Robert Zwijnenberg, and Lagerlöf can be identified as reflecting independently on the impact of the author’s felt experience of art in their art history writing.¹⁰¹

But it could also be argued that subjectivity is everywhere in art history and that the discipline’s veil of objectivity has always been, in any case, illusory.¹⁰² Don Fowler’s seminal 1991 article on ekphrasis identified an ‘almost moral distaste’ for description in the discipline. He wrote: ‘what we are interested in in narratives is neither plot nor pictures but ideology.’¹⁰³ Description up to this point had been demonised for its ability to conceal ideology. In order not to fall into the web of such covert ideologies, then, we had been encouraged to aspire to a seemingly more transparent analytical mode. And yet, as Jas Elsner, building on Fowler’s discussion, argues, art history ‘far from being a rigorous pursuit [...] is nothing other than ekphrasis, or more precisely an extended argument built on ekphrasis’. Elsner’s conception of description is usefully broad:

¹⁰⁰ Clark, *The Sight of Death*, p. viii.

¹⁰¹ Among non-art historians you could site Arasse, *Take a Closer Look*; Peter de Bolla, *Art Matters* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003); Hustvedt, *Mysteries of the Rectangle*; Maria Fusco, *Give Up Art*, Jeff Khonsary ed. (Vancouver and Los Angeles: New Documents, 2017); Maria Fusco ed., *The Happy Hypocrite*, (London: Bookworks, 2008 – ongoing).

¹⁰² Many scholars have made this argument, see in particular: Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’; Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (London: J. Murray, 1983); Elkins, *On Pictures*; Mitchell, *Picture Theory* especially the sections on ‘Textual Pictures and ‘Pictorial Texts’; Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*; Keith Moxey, *The Practices of Persuasion* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹⁰³ Don Fowler, ‘Narrate and Describe: The Problem of Ekphrasis’, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 81 (1991).

descriptions ‘conspire to translate the visual and sensual nature of a work of art into a linguistic formulation capable of being voiced in a discursive argument.’¹⁰⁴ Without our subjectivities working as mediators of artworks, therefore, art history could not exist.

The following chapters register the impact of subjectivity variously and incrementally, then. To some extent subjectivity affects our object selections, going some way to account (with or positively or negatively) for why we are drawn to study one object, artist, text, history or period rather than another. Secondly, throughout our research we are engaged in framing arguments, images, personalities and objects. We characterise them through careful and deliberate editing and quotation – every decision that we make is motivated by judgement. Thirdly, the accidental nature of links that we make in our research – and that shape the form and content of our archives – should not be overlooked though it is rarely made explicit. Richard Shiff is one of a growing number of scholars to embrace the serendipity of research, describing his handling of history as being driven by ‘the chance illuminations that arbitrary sequences of documents provide.’¹⁰⁵ Fourthly, and here the activation of subjectivity is more overt, it begins to extend its reach by precipitating a whole line of inquiry as we saw with Johannesson.¹⁰⁶ A fifth variant, propounded by Panofsky, sees subjectivity functioning in parallel with more traditional historical data recovery in which, ‘intuitive aesthetic recreation and archaeological research are interconnected, to form [...] an ‘organic situation’, in theory at least.¹⁰⁷ And lastly, in its most expansive role, subjectivity is at once the means and the end of investigation allowing for a dissolution of positivism in favour of a more meandering, speculative and imaginative trajectory.

Subjectivity and Giovanni Gentile

In contextualising the type of subjectivity active here an obvious course might have been to start with phenomenology. I could have recounted phenomenology’s numerous

¹⁰⁴ Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ Cited in Shiff, *Doubt*, p. 11. See also Adrian Rifkin on the ‘coincidences’ that shape the fabric of the Ingres archives within which he works, in *Ingres Then, and Now* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ Johannesson, ‘On the ‘Irrational Remainder’’, pp. 78–79.

¹⁰⁷ Panofsky, *Meaning and the Visual Arts*, p. 39.

strands which have proliferated in various guises.¹⁰⁸ I could have implemented the most relevant, perhaps even following a particular phenomenologist, and framed my thesis with a set of clearly defined precepts (or as clearly defined as phenomenology's inherently non-systemic nature allows).¹⁰⁹ But this would undermine the spirit in which this thesis is conceived and carried out. One of my concerns is to pay attention to the ways in which ideas have morphed through the writing of this thesis, and to preserve these elements in its final form. As such my approach is not predetermined; pairings suggest themselves but to begin with I am not sure why. It is only through a concerted worrying of them that the particular character and form of the thought which emerges from the pairings becomes explicit. The rest follows.

A 'chance illumination' of my own: through the course of the years preparing this thesis I was also working freelance and was commissioned to translate a series of texts by a twentieth-century Italian philosopher, relatively little known outside Italy, Giovanni Gentile.¹¹⁰ What I found from working, as it were, *inside* Gentile's texts was a serendipitous reverberation of many of the ideas and approaches that I had already set in motion through the encounters in my case studies. Gentile's thinking helped to define

¹⁰⁸ For an excellent account of phenomenology see Simon Glendinning, *In the Name of Phenomenology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) who argues for understanding phenomenology as more multifarious and non-systematic than the impression given by phenomenological arguments that focus too closely on Merleau-Ponty. In fact phenomenology's roots go back to Christoph Friedrich Oetinger who first used the term in 1736 and was more fully taken up in the early nineteenth century with G. W. F. Hegel and later in the early twentieth century with Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur. Other particular strands of phenomenology include G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977); Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, F. Kersten trans. (Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic, 1982) and *Experience and Judgement: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*, Ludwig Landgrebe ed., James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks trans. (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1973); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson trans. (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1962); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Colin Smith trans. (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte trans. (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2009); J.L. Austin, *How to do things with Words*, J.O. Urmson ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, David E. Linge trans. and ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) and *Truth and Method*, Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall trans. (London, New York: Bloomsbury 2013); Paul Ricœur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, John B. Thomson ed., (Cambridge University Press, 1981) and *Memory, History and Forgetting* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004); Jacques Derrida, *On Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016) and *Speech and Phenomena and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1973).

¹⁰⁹ Glendinning takes a wide-angle view of phenomenological thinking, what he calls 'phenomenology at large', and argues that phenomenology has wrongly been considered a 'movement on its way to becoming a doctrine', in *In the Name of Phenomenology*, pp. 5–6.

¹¹⁰ Mentioned above Shiff, *Doubt*, p. 11.

the nature, purpose and interpretative potential of the kind of subjectivity that I was intuitively employing. His thought does not, therefore, impose upon the thesis but it does help to crystallise certain things contained within it, while nonetheless leaving the fuzzy edges of its encounters intact.

In referencing Gentile, I should point out, I make use of his epistemology, as opposed to his political philosophy. I deliberately separate the man, his politics and his actions from his philosophy because of his turn to fascism later in life, a turn with which this thesis does not identify. His political actions have, however, largely dominated his scholarly reception, impeding his influence on current thought, but there is much to gain from his treatment of subjective behaviour and its impact on the everyday business of making decisions and connections.

Most importantly, Gentile's model of subjectivity – which he sometimes refers to as 'Ego', 'spirit', 'act', or 'self-conscious-ego' – turns on a porous, overlapping connection between the objects and subjects of experience. The act of thought mediates, indeed *realises* experience.¹¹¹ Subjectivity is bound in a 'reciprocal relationship' of its own making through the very act of thought itself. Crucially this reciprocity is connected to the world 'via sensible experience' or the 'act' of participating in this world. The thinker, according to Gentile, brings together the world and the self; he is 'an untiring and diligent creator and custodian, actor and spectator.'¹¹² Subjectivity is, therefore, both active and responsive. It is constantly engaged in what Gentile termed an 'Internal Dialogue Procedure' which scholar Daniela Coli characterises as 'an open thinking process', and which strongly aligns with the process of intersubjective triangulation or dialogic thinking aloud that forms the backbone of this thesis.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Gentile, 'Basic Concepts of Actualism', pp. 355–357.

¹¹² *ibid.*, p. 348.

¹¹³ Gentile sees both subject and object as essentially porous and does not hold that any distinction exists between the internal and external, so the idea of an 'internal dialogue' is only metaphorical. Daniela Coli, 'Gentile and Modernity', *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni in Gentile Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield eds., Gentile essays Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield trans., 20(1–2) (2014), p. 149. See section A:1 for a further discussion of 'triangulation'.

The subjectivity at play here likewise constitutes an active, sometimes speculative, thought in the present. It is an ongoing action, an ‘act’ or what Gentile, typically circuitously describes as: ‘act in act, not a completed act, or a partially completed act, and part of the act of completing itself’ (note, incidentally, the Steinian characteristics of this phrase).¹¹⁴ It is categorically not the result of research already completed, therefore setting itself not apart from its objects of interests but a volatile extension of them, an act in the process of becoming.¹¹⁵

This similarity, between Gentile’s concept of subjectivity in theory and my implementation of subjectivity in practice, is threaded throughout the thesis, reflecting on its implications for the writing of art-historical research more generally. One common criticism of such research is its assumption that one’s subjectivity is knowable, a critique Rampley makes of Bal’s work. But Rampley’s critique gives the impression that subjectivity is a solid, static form. If we follow Gentile’s notion of subjectivity:

The Ego is neither soul-substance nor a thing [...] It is everything because it is not anything. If it has to be something, it is a determined spirit, a spirit that realizes itself in its own world as a poem, an action, a word, a system of thought. But this world is real to the extent that as the poem is being composed, the action is taking place, the word is uttered and the thought arises and becomes part of a system.¹¹⁶

Though I would take issue with the final claim about thought becoming ‘part of a system’, what Gentile otherwise claims about subjectivity rings true here: it is neither fixed (‘a thing’), nor a position, but in a state of constant flux, shifting and amending, it ‘realises itself’ through sensible responses with its surroundings. If we accept such a proposition, the validity of Rampley’s critique of Bal, and by implication other poetic art historians, abates.

¹¹⁴ Gentile, ‘The Method of Immanence’, *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni in Gentile Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield eds., Gentile essays Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield trans., 20(1–2) (2014), p. 238.

¹¹⁵ This also links to Gertrude Stein’s concept of the ‘continuous present’. See Stein, ‘Composition as Explanation’, in *A Stein Reader*, Ulla E. Dydo ed. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 498–499 discussed further in chapter 4 of this thesis.

¹¹⁶ Gentile, ‘Basic Concepts of Actualism’, p. 349.

A further danger at stake in historical or critical accounts that give primacy to subjective responses, and already alluded to, is the charge of solipsism, that is, a lack of relevance or engagement beyond the self. Both Sontag and Pater stood so accused so I will discuss the matter at greater length in chapter 3, but Gentile was well aware of the risk of solipsism too. If we look again at Rampley's critique we see that his four examples have, for him, only limited use or interest because they foreground the self over universal concerns. But 'the solipsist's Ego,' as Gentile makes clear, 'is a particular and negative Ego; it senses its own isolation and the impossibility of escaping it. So the solipsist is an egotist, denying the good just as he denies the truth. But his Ego is negative because it is identical to itself; and that makes it a thing, not a spirit.' And so we return to the crucial notion that the subject neither conceives of itself as an object, nor allows itself to be objectified; it is an active, living act, without predetermined form or limit. If we accept 'the principle of the infinite progressive universalisation of the Ego itself' then we see subjectivity excluding 'nothing from itself'. It is capacious; it behaves not through closed circuit insularity but through a continuous and unpremeditated response and adjustment to the world. As such, it is more akin to an expanding spiral, through the act of active and ongoing thought or what Gentile calls, 'pensiero pensante' (thought thinking).¹¹⁷

The implications of Gentile's Actualist thought are far-reaching for they also answer another of Rampley's issues concerning the type of useful knowledge which poetic art histories can contribute to the collective discipline. Here, Gentile's concept of the definition of knowledge is crucial. Knowledge does not involve a mastering of information: 'knowing as being'.¹¹⁸ Coli unpacks this, describing how Gentile 'casts knowledge as the mediation of the thinking subject and thought object, for which knowledge is a continual process of the actuality of theory and practice.'¹¹⁹ As such, knowledge, like subjectivity, is freed from the boundaries of being rendered static, and measurable (to be gained, contributed or proven) and is instead cast in terms of being in

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 357.

¹¹⁸ Gentile, 'Pure Experience and Historical Reality', *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile in Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield eds., Gentile essays Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield trans., 20(1–2) (2014), p. 286.

¹¹⁹ Coli, 'Gentile and Modernity', p. 157.

a constant state of becoming: what Gentile would term ‘immanence’ and what I have referred to as ‘emergence’.¹²⁰

The Implications of Matthew Rampley’s Critique

Throughout this chapter I have referred to Rampley’s critique of poetic art histories but his reading begs a series of questions that are fundamental to this thesis and worth unpicking further: How should we define the type of insight that stems from a thesis of this kind? Can that insight be considered knowledge? And is it useful?

To recap, for Rampley poetic art histories are:

A: too subjective to have any claim or value as conveyors of knowledge, partly because you cannot confirm or deny their observations. They are impossible to defend discursively.

B: have spawned no followers and therefore function as anomalies rather than useful contributions to what he calls, ‘the collective enterprise of art history’.

C: use language that supplants or suppresses the objects they claim to address.

A:1 Triangulation

The claims made in this thesis, though stemming from subjective intuitions about the associations between a text and an image, intimate a relationship that, I am saying, appears to exist and does so in specific ways. Each pairing relies on a balance between what Gentile might call an internal dialogue and a staged or hypothetical dialogue that I follow up between paintings and texts. They are built from a ‘triangulation’ of positions, as Donald Davidson would put it, which are loosely correlated and compared.¹²¹ I am not claiming that they have to be seen as such, just that they might be, and when they are I pay close attention to the dynamics and implications at stake both for these newly established relationships and for the approach to images, texts, and history in general.

I support this claim by situating myself between two key ideas, Davidson’s ‘triangulation’ and Oakeshott’s ‘pursuit of intimations’.

¹²⁰ Gentile, ‘The Method of Immanence’, pp. 235–275.

¹²¹ Donald Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 128.

This thesis contains multiple concurrent voices which I tune in to and out of, sometimes synchronously, at others adjusting the volume on one or two. Davidson would call this process ‘triangulation’: ‘the result of a threefold interaction, an interaction that is two-fold from the point of view of each of the two agents: each is interacting simultaneously with the world and with the other agent.’¹²² For Davidson, it is the only way to account for the ‘existence, and therefore the emergence of thought’. This is precisely what I am seeking to track: the emergence of critical associations that are sparked by the feeling of encounter – between paintings, my words, and the words of others – in which a confluence of approaches is registered and explored. In triangulation, ‘each creature learns to correlate the reactions of other creatures with changes or objects in the world to which it also reacts’.¹²³ It is not that our reactions to the world have to conform, of course, but sharing our reactions, however personal or supposedly ‘subjective’, ‘gives us the only account of how experience gives a specific content to our thoughts’.¹²⁴ It reminds us that thought derives from the specificity of the experience of a feeling subject. Sharing responses to our environments, Davidson argues, is crucial because ‘it is what causes a belief that gives it its content’.¹²⁵ Consider this thesis to be a sharing of separate, though here coalescing, experiences – between painters, writers and scholars – retaining in its expression the lived experience of these encounters.

The fundamental basis of Davidson’s claim is that subjective, intersubjective and objective knowledges are ‘objective in the sense that their truth is independent of their being believed to be true’.¹²⁶ This, however, is where his model begins to diverge from my own. Davidson assumes that each point of the triangle need bear no relationship of similarity or confluence. His triangulation is one of generality: any triangulation is valid because it is the belief (however unconnected) of each agent that produces content and therefore truth. It may be that those agents in the end produce contents that are in some

¹²² *ibid.*, p. 128.

¹²³ *ibid.*, p. 128–9.

¹²⁴ Davidson would reject my use of the term subjective here because he argues that the dichotomy between subjective and objective is false, *ibid.*, p. xiii.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 129.

¹²⁶ *ibid.*, p. xiii.

ways shared but they are not necessarily so from the outset. My use of the multi-way interaction is more specific. What happens when the work of my supposedly separate entities – my protagonists, or ‘agents’ as Davidson has it – reveal thematic, structural, linguistic, atmospheric or other forms of confluence? The fact that my bringing these entities into relation is far from arbitrary, despite initial appearances, is important. But neither are their interrelations easy or immediately identifiable from a position outside of the imaginary triangle of relations that I am setting up. What becomes clear, then, is that this model of research can only be implemented from within the triangle, and not, in the position of supposed objectivity, from without.¹²⁷

So as blurred thought-lines between the feeling of objects, images and words are allowed to surface, beginning to interweave, I am distinctly aware of the effect of cross-referencing these feelings or experiences or responses and recognising similarities between them. And as parallels emerge and intersect, the personal begins to hold its own. Our understanding is furthered by viewing encounters within the context of other, sometimes surprisingly analogous, creative activities. While the sentiment in the current paragraph resonates with my own approach, its all-important terminology does not always. Borrowing from scientific terms like ‘cross-reference’ and ‘triangulation’, it presents my study as measurable against scholarship that is premised on the kind of positivism propounded by Fredric Jameson in his cry to ‘Always historicize!’.¹²⁸ To assess this thesis according to a measure of specific knowledge(s) is to lose some of its subtlety and complexity, as will become clear. Rather, this study is concerned with how thought emerges from experience and through its convergence with other images and words. It is about the difficulty of articulating this process and the effect of a particular network of analogies. It is about setting up an environment which enables confluences to run their course, and observing what happens. Observations, of course, can also be countered with a different observation. There is no obligation to accept them wholly.

¹²⁷ Rifkin makes a similar claim in his study of Ingres claiming that: ‘Over the years critique from ‘without’ has come to be replaced by an engagement from within’, in Rifkin, *Ingres*, p. 16. Though my approach is markedly different from Rifkin’s who romanticises the archival work of art history as process in archaeological and poetic terms, and tends to relate back to questions about the artist and intentions.

¹²⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as A Socially Symbolic Act* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. iv.

The other thread, in countering Rampley's claim that poetic art histories are unarguable, is Oakeshott's idea of 'the pursuit of intimations'.¹²⁹ Though dissimilar in subject matter, the spirit of Oakeshott's argument finds affinity with mine. His core criticism is of abstract theoretical models being put into practice, imposed upon a political situation, without adapting to the needs or requirements of the real-world situations in which they find themselves. He argues that thinking is developed not by applying preexistent methodologies but by 'the amendment of existing arrangements [...] exploring and pursuing what is intimated in them'.¹³⁰ Political thought, he believes, should be adaptive, responsive and sensitive to its real-world environment, much as I argue that art-historical methodologies should not be imposed upon artworks but that particular approaches to, and means of writing about, them should be allowed to emerge from our encounters with them. Both Oakeshott's political thought and my subjective art-historical thought are characterised as ongoing practices rather than fixed, utopian ideals. Both are distinctive for their spirit of openness and exploration, where understanding (rather than concrete knowledge) is adaptive: variously absorbed, built upon or redirected by the meeting of one thought, expression, situation and another. In other words, thought, and writing are situated.¹³¹

So, to return to Rampley, we need not depend only on definitions, models or methods of art-historical enquiry to define the knowledge accrued by art history, or develop alternative approaches to it. Instead, or rather, as well, we can look at the intimations to which extant art-historical discourses give rise. This thesis, and the understanding to which it gives rise, should therefore be perceived as a series of intimations which it is following up and which might simultaneously invite further speculation. Its 'solid' findings are secondary. What this thesis proposes is that we – scholars, art historians and

¹²⁹ Michael Oakeshott, 'Political Education', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Worcester and London: Trinity Press, 1967), pp. 117–137.

¹³⁰ My emphases. *ibid.*, p. 124.

¹³¹ See Jane Rendell, *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010). Rendell sees 'Site-Writing' as a kind of 'Situated Criticism' 'produced [...] according to the distinctive locations of interpretation and the varying distances and conditions of responsibility interpreters and performers have in relation to authors and audiences', pp. 2–7. Rendell takes this the spatial terms of a situated criticism more literally because of her broader interest in architecture. For me the idea of subjective art history as a site-specific art-historical thought functions more metaphorically.

art writers – might do well to loosen our grip on ways of seeing that we deem valuable or useful. Watch, this thesis says, as it sees things, and watches itself seeing things. An experience emerges which it at once enacts, reflects upon and tries to put into words. These words imperfectly equate and simultaneously feed into, add to, whittle away at, that experience. But in order to become useful they must become part of a larger conversation, rather than merely an idiosyncratic backstory to be later buried. Now, once we have shared insights, voiced observations – whether they diverge, run parallel or intersect, whether we agree or disagree with one another’s impressions (most likely a bit of both) – we will, I would wager, have seen a little more than before.¹³² The truth value of these insights, however that might be styled, are not my concern. But because these observations and associations have been thought, discussed at length, turned metaphorically over and situated within the context of a related discourse, they become valid, ‘objective’ (if we must), and of some universal interest.

The claims that I make about either the texts or images that appear here do not, therefore, purport to be ground-breaking. They are in fact rather modest: ‘an amplified sort of noticing’.¹³³ Noticing is, of course, a very ordinary operation of experience, as are many of the strategies that follow – analogy, understanding, even improvisation and so on¹³⁴ – but such structures are also, as Felski notes, ‘political, philosophical, and aesthetic concepts fanning out into complex histories.’¹³⁵ Take, for example, the framing of this thesis through hypothetical dialogues enacted and observed between materials, words and objects. It depends on a simultaneous awareness of observations *as they are taking place* and constant checking and rechecking in the light of how another party – either specific, general or hypothetical – might respond to each impression. This process

¹³² This method of creating consensus or disagreement based on a correlation of thoughts is further developed in chapter 1 with reference to Donald Davidson’s concept of triangulation.

¹³³ I borrow this phrase from Wakefield who is concerned that Gentile’s idea of ‘absolute creativity’ be ‘demoted’ to ‘an amplified sort of noticing’. The phrasing lacks the kind of authority that is to Gentile’s tastes but suits me fine. Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism* (PhD thesis: Cardiff University, 2013), p. 48.

¹³⁴ See Gilbert Ryle writing on the everyday nature of improvisation as a (non?)system of thought. He writes, I shall soon be reminding you of some of the familiar and unaugust sorts of improvisations which, just *qua* thinking beings, we all essay every day of the week, indeed in every hour of the waking day’, Gilbert Ryle, “Improvisation,” *Mind* 85, no. 337 (1976), p. 69 and referenced in George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies Volume 1*, First Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 5–6.

¹³⁵ Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 17.

leads, in turn, to a modification – an ‘amendment’ as Oakeshott would have it – of claims or observations.¹³⁶ This thesis *does* while watching things *being done*, or, to return to Gentile, it evidences the unfurling of actual, present thinking: *pensiero pensante* as opposed to *pensiero pensato*. That is, *thought thinking* in the present continuous, rather than *thought-that-has-already-been-thought* in the closed past.¹³⁷

Returning to Rampley’s critique of the four poetic examples whose findings he deems impossible to substantiate, the character of discourses like that just outlined is eminently arguable for and against. Whether such observations can be confirmed or denied depends on how convincingly this writing conveys the proposed constellations of relationships. Are the pairings sympathetic to you? Do they coalesce in my writing of them or do you find them uncoupling? How do the pairings spark other clusters of relationships? Where do these pairings or your own pairings take you? I have no doubt that the answer to these will be neither straightforward nor constant. Either way they become propositions that are available to be pushed against, resisted or allowed to unfold further than I have, further than I, alone, could. These pairings are open invitations, meant to be followed up, pursued, by your own intuitions.

B:1 Followable Anomalies

Can a text like this really provide a methodology for others to implement, though? Is it ‘followable’?¹³⁸ Fundamentally it sees itself as something of a catalyst for other possible impressions, other clusters of relations and encounters. But it is not followable in the sense that it does not offer a systematic methodology to be deployed in another context, since, as explained in A:2 above, my approach is site-specific, generated by the

¹³⁶ Again, here I make oblique reference to Davidson’s ‘triangulation’, in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, pp. 128–130.

¹³⁷ Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile*, p. 33.

¹³⁸ For the term ‘followable’ I am indebted to philosopher Onora O’Neill’s term ‘followability,’ see Onora O’Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 2–4. Not all of O’Neill’s theories on constructivist reasoning are relevant, however. Her claim, for example, that we can only agree if we take as a starting point a common organisational system of thought or shared authority is at cross purposes with my project. If, she writes, our starting points appeal to or rest on ‘arbitrary’ claims, no useful reasoning can take place. But what follows reveals that the arbitrary is not such a sticking point. See Melissa Barry, ‘Constructivist practical reasoning and objectivity’, in *Reading Onora O’Neill*, David Archard, Monique Deveaux, Neil Manson, and Daniel Weinstock eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 18–20 for an excellent discussion of O’Neill.

particular elements and artworks that appear here. But its spirit is, I would argue, eminently ‘followable’: You begin with your encounter with, and between, two artworks and take it from there.

As already touched on, the elements that appear here could be accused of being ‘merely’ arbitrary, in which case what constitutes arbitrary needs more careful consideration. It might at first appear that the pairings around which this project grows – Zurbarán and Sontag, Doig and Pater, Stein and Simpson – are subject to whim. But as my readers I ask you to suspend, momentarily, your mistrust of the pairings and allow their connections to come in to focus through my discussion of them. A short return to Davidson’s theory of triangulation might usefully stave off further charges of arbitrariness. To recap, Davidson claims that when sharing personal responses about a shared environment vectors are drawn between players. We could call these vectors beliefs or experiences. Davidson holds that these beliefs, however subjective, intersubjective or objective, are worth articulating, ‘independent of their being believed to be true’.¹³⁹ By a committed probing of these beliefs in the following chapters I will note the ways in which they coalesce or diverge, and as these vectors accrue, becoming networks expanding their imaginative reach – whether verbal or visual, whether direct or poetic, whether causal or consequential – their rigour likewise builds.

In characterising poetic art-histories as ‘anomalies’ perhaps the mistake Rampley has made is in not looking in the right places for examples of their legacy. Hayden White’s idea of ‘Metahistory’, for example, discusses ‘Poetic Histories’ and also ‘Lyric’ or ‘Lyrical’ histories (after Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*), although Gavin Parkinson has argued that White’s impact on art history remains regrettably limited.¹⁴⁰ As my section on ‘Subjectivity through Art History’ has suggested, the roots of poetically inflected art histories run deep, through ekphrasis for example.¹⁴¹ It is also true to say,

¹³⁹ Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. xiii.

¹⁴⁰ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 88. And see Parkinson’s discussion of White’s impact in ‘(Blind Summit) Art Writing Narrative, Middle Voice’, p. 285. And Stephen Bann also alludes to this in ‘Response: Reasons to be cheerful’, *The Art Bulletin*, 89 (2007), 34–9 p. 38.

¹⁴¹ Elsner includes ekphrastic excerpts from a series of deceased art historians that include Alois Reigl, Han Sedlmaeyr, Edgar Wind, J. D. Beazley, E. H. Gombrich, Michael Baxandall, and Michael Camille, pp. 14–15.

as Elsner does that ekphrasis in art history is employed ‘for the purpose of making an argument’; it is a jumping off point rather than a means of communication and research output in its own right.¹⁴² But more explicitly subjective or poetically suffused examples do exist, though currently only at the peripheries with disciplines like art writing and creative criticism. So perhaps it is a problem of viewing art history in terms that are too restrictive. If, as I do, we take art history to encompass art criticism and art writing as well, then our search for writing on art in terms that are concurrent with Rampley’s examples yields greater results.¹⁴³ Unlike the fields of creative criticism explored earlier, there is a lack of explicitly art-historical scholarly texts that collate relevant examples, rendering subjective art histories too dispersed to register fully on the art-historical consciousness. But this lacuna may also be due to the way that texts like these emerge non-methodologically; they take shape not systematically but sporadically and sometimes haphazardly – qualities that could well describe the handling of this chapter – the contours and contexts of their appearance not clearly defined, signposted or logged as explicitly poetic or subjective.

B:2 On Method

Does the current thesis present a methodology that someone else can unpack, make use of, or apply, in another context? Yes and no. The approach employed here – comparing two things, an image and a text, that are historically and geographically disparate – can be followed.¹⁴⁴ It is a technique I often use with students through writing workshops

¹⁴² Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’, p. 11.

¹⁴³ See section entitled ‘Art Writing / Creative Criticism / Art Criticism / Art History’ below. Further examples might include: Jean Cocteau’s ‘Indirect Criticism’; Francis Ponge’s writing on art which entwines poetry and philosophy in *L’Atelier contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977); Jan Zwicky’s *Lyric Philosophy* (Alberta: Brush Education, 2014) which reads as part-philosophy, part-poem, part-artwork; Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley trans. (London and New York: Continuum, 2008) which sits somewhere between prose-poetry, philosophy and science. Catherine Grant references a range of creatively art-historical texts that are also relevant in ‘A narrative of what wishes what it wishes it to be’, in ‘Creative Writing and Art History’ (2011). These include Yve Lomax, *Writing the Image: An Adventure with Art and Theory* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000); Gavin Butt ed., *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); and Della Pollock, ‘Performing writing’, in *The Ends of Performance*, Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane eds. (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

¹⁴⁴ I am claiming no originality in this basic method of compare and contrast but as will become apparent the way in which the pairings emerge and then coalesce with my own writing and approach is distinctive.

devised to help hone approaches to writing about art beyond the explicative.¹⁴⁵ Pairings bring into focus visual and verbal encounters, opening up ways of seeing, absorbing and processing artworks. How you might go about making these pairings is, however, another matter, given that the pairings themselves arise out of an intuitive process whereby an image and a text seem, to the researcher, to be in sympathy. To that extent, the following thesis is unfollowable and therefore could not be ‘applied’ in an orthodox methodological sense.¹⁴⁶

But does this constitute a lack of methodology (connoted negatively) or a non-methodology (a positive choice)? Methodology, alongside theory, as T. J. Clark and many others have noted, has tended to become instrumentalised and as a result diluted. Benson and Connors, in their collaboratively written introduction to *Creative Criticism*, lament the application of methodology ‘willy-nilly to what you read or look at’. To do so, they provocatively insist, is to miss ‘what is best about it, namely the fact that it eschews the fatuously formulaic or the mindlessly methodological’, signalling the ‘mechanising of criticism’.¹⁴⁷ Methods for thinking and writing about art should arise, instead, in tandem with the experience of the work itself.

C:1 On Knowledge

What of Rampley’s accusation of ‘the language of representation blot[ting] out the object of discourse’? But poetic art histories represent the experience of the objects and not the objects themselves. Experience cannot be said to ‘blot out’ the object, just as it does not constitute a blotting out of the subject either, but a bleeding together of the two. Paying close attention to the sensibility of encounter between self and objects does not result in the replacement of the object but a capacious expansion of it. Indeed, when Rampley claims that the work of his exemplars ‘is less an exercise in art-historical investigation and rather more the attempt to objectify their own aesthetic response to varying types of artwork’, he lends a finality to the text in which closure is not the

¹⁴⁵ In seminars as Associate Lecturer for Art and Visual Culture and Fine Art undergraduates at University of the West of England as well as through writing workshops at: Plymouth Arts Centre; KARST gallery; Index, The Swedish Contemporary Art Foundation; and Hauser and Wirth, Somerset.

¹⁴⁶ Karen Lang and Stephen Bann, ‘The Sense of the Past and the Writing of History: Stephen Bann in Conversation with Karen Lang’, *The Art Bulletin*, 95(4) (2013), p. 552.

¹⁴⁷ Benson and Connors, *Creative Criticism*, p. 33.

intention.¹⁴⁸ Longhi, Stokes, Bal, and Didi-Huberman's responses cannot be objectified in this way because their particular ways of seeing and articulating thought are presented as ongoing.

Rampley's argument seems to depend, then, on a particular idea about what constitutes 'historical investigation' and relates back to my earlier discussion of knowledge(s) in relation to practice-led PhDs. Investigation should reveal quantifiable truths, useful insights and new objective knowledge that can be put back to use in the art-historical system. How can art history capitalise on knowledge that these poetic meanderings unearth? Rampley appears to ask. This is one reason for my preferring the term understanding over knowledge. By understanding I mean the implementation of abstract thought in becoming familiar with a person, thing, or relation rather than its 'correct' interpretation or comprehension (*connaître* rather than *savoir*). The demeanour of understanding is more expansive and inclusive than 'knowledge' which feels enclosed in too binary an idea of intellectual activity, positing knowledge against ignorance. Understanding requires a sensitivity to material and also to its own articulation which I find intellectually fruitful. It is far less easy to *capitalise* on (own, profit from, exploit) understanding.¹⁴⁹ Instead we might speak of types of understandings being *metabolised* (processed, absorbed) into the discipline. The latter requires a more open and critically engaged thought that, I would argue, has the potential to change the way that we think about art historically.

C:2 On Art Writing

The matter turns on the purpose of writing about or investigating art. Maria Fusco, a catalyst for developments in art writing, wrote that its purpose is to 'illicit; to unlock; to *induce* essential obscurity with essential obscurity'.¹⁵⁰ On this Didi-Huberman would agree: writing about art should preserve art's essential 'dissimulation', preserving the

¹⁴⁸ Rampley, 'Poetics', p. 25.

¹⁴⁹ This may well be the result of a widespread problem with the professionalisation of scholarship in the humanities to which Paul Barolsky and others allude; see Barolsky, 'Writing Art History', p. 398.

¹⁵⁰ Maria Fusco, 'Say who I am: Or a Broad Private Wink', in *Judgement and Contemporary Art Criticism*, Jeff Khonsary and Melanie O'Brian eds. (Vancouver: Fillip/Artspeak, 2010).

spirit of art's holding back.¹⁵¹ Such approaches attempt to form verbal equivalents to the mood or mode of the artworks they address. At the other end of the spectrum, a more conventional purpose of writing about art tends to model art-historical investigation that is inherently explicative, intent on revealing previously undiscovered knowledge about art and its contexts.¹⁵² Neither definition quite fits the writing of this thesis, however, which is caught and catalysed by encounters between paintings, texts and critical responses to both. It registers the repercussions of these encounters with artworks, their conjoining and morphing association as, in itself, a critical practice.

But does writing like this, as Rampley fears, end up replacing ('blotting out') the objects of interest? Does it amount to a playing hard and fast with truths, a distortion or fiction? The idea that the words we place alongside artworks should be *appropriate*, at all times leaving the artwork *intact*, is well entrenched.¹⁵³ It is as if our words should only float atop the surface of artwork, circumnavigating it perhaps, instead of absorbing the artwork as the artwork absorbs our words. That term, *intact*, derives from the Latin *tactus* or touch, but when we use it in relation to art we tend to see it as a barricade, a warning not to get too close, or interfere, as if to do so might *alter* the work to which it refers. Subjectivity is often blamed for such impositions. In fact, Pater, in chapter 3, is regularly accused of overstepping such boundaries. In a manner reminiscent of Rampley's 'blotting out' Cairns Craig sees Pater's overt subjectivity as causing a 'displacement of the work of art' which in turn leads his particular brand of criticism to 'assiduously impose [...] itself upon the original object'.¹⁵⁴ I suggest otherwise, that Pater's words (among others) act in expansive confluence with, rather than effacement of, the topic of this thesis.

¹⁵¹ Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, p. 273. English translation taken from Didi-Huberman, 'The Art of Not Describing: Vermeer – the Details and the Patch', *History of the Human Sciences*, 2(2) (1989), p. 135.

¹⁵² Holly, 'Mourning and Method', p. 165.

¹⁵³ On the ethics of proximity and tact in literary criticism see Jacques Derrida, *On Touching Jean-Luc Nancy*, Christine Irizzary ed., (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Lisa McNally, *Reading Theories in Contemporary Criticism* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); and Valentine Cunningham's emphasis on close reading characterised through 'gentle touch, caring touch, loving touch; appropriate handling, unmanipulative reading', *Reading After Theory*, (Oxford and Massachusetts, Blackwell, 2002), pp. 157–158. Isobel Armstrong, 'Textual Harassment: The Ideology of Close Reading, or How Close is Close?', *Textual Practice*, 9(3) 1995); and Sarah Jackson, *Tactile Poetics: Touch and Contemporary Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

¹⁵⁴ Craig, *Associationism*, p. 249.

Art Writing/Creative Criticism/Art Criticism/Art History

Perhaps we could set out the purpose of writing about art in different terms. If we ask ourselves how and to what end, we write the understandings – rather than solid findings and/or knowledge – of encounters with art, art history, and literature, then the constraints of art writing shift. As discussed, the, albeit amorphous, field of art writing, or its sister field of creative criticism in literature, offers an alternative (non-)model since both fields consider the language used to write about artworks (broadly understood) as simultaneously a carrier of mood, interpretation, understanding, as well as information.¹⁵⁵ These fields, though not new, have been more self-consciously developed as distinct fields in the past four decades, and stress the contiguities between what words say and what words do.¹⁵⁶ They challenge, among other things, the prepositional relationships suggested by the phrases ‘writing about’ or ‘writing on’ a subject which they see as further entrenching the long-standing separation between writing and art. These prepositional relationships suggest that writing can step back from art and offer an objective appraisal of it, thereby preserving the oppositional relationship: Art *and* Writing, Word *and* Image. They sometimes go further to suggest a valuative hierarchisation: writing mastering art, subject against object, words over images.¹⁵⁷ All of these spatial conceptual configurations imply a sense of distance between the genres. It is here that the impact of Enlightenment claims of the possibility

¹⁵⁵ This discussion is also partly borne out of, and informed by, a renewed interest in the essay genre as discussed above in the section entitled, ‘Form: The Essay’.

¹⁵⁶ See Austin, *How to do things with Words* on “‘performative utterances” leading to “illocutionary acts” i.e. performance of an act *in* saying something’ which ‘indicates the issuing of an utterance is the performing of an action’ pp. 32, 99, and 6. He contrasts this with ‘statements’ which he terms ‘constative utterances’ and function to ‘just say[...] something’, p. 6–7.

¹⁵⁷ See Irit Rogoff on prepositions in ‘Studying Visual Culture’, in *The Visual Culture Reader*, Nicholas Mirzoeff ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 28. And also Rendell on the significance of spatial prepositions in relation to art criticism in *Site Writing*, p. 6.

that we can be objective outsiders endures.¹⁵⁸ Psychoanalytic theory is just one mode of twentieth-century thinking which reveals the impossibility of such a proposition.¹⁵⁹ We are no longer aware of, or admit to, believing in these Enlightenment values but the Enlightenment habit dies hard and continues in positivist attitudes harboured unwittingly by scholars who would consider themselves not to be so inclined.¹⁶⁰ Instead, after Susan Howe, this project aims ‘to meet the work with writing’ or better the *works*, since the works my words meet are not viewed in isolation but caught up in meetings of their own.¹⁶¹ Jane Rendell has, in a similar vein, described favouring a prepositional relation conveyed by the phrase ‘writing as the object’ which attempts to ‘invent a writing that is somehow “like” the artwork’.¹⁶² But what does all this have to do with art history?

Over the past twenty or so years increasing numbers of art historians have recognised, as Rampley does, the often cumbersome nature of the language of art-historical discourses and the limits that it sets on the scope and ambition of the discipline.¹⁶³ The writing of art history has been described, at various times as ‘dry and emotionally

¹⁵⁸ Benson and Connors, *Creative Criticism*, pp. 18 – 22. And Bernardo Ortiz Campo ‘Criticism and Experience’ *E-flux Journal* #13 - February 2010 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/13/61322/criticism-and-experience/> [accessed May 1 2015]: ‘One can say that there is writing about art, above art, across art, after art, against art, along art, alongside art, amid art, among art, around art, as art, atop art, barring art, before art, behind art, below art, beneath art, beside art, besides art, between art, beyond art, by art, concerning art, despite art, except art, excluding art, failing art, following art, for art, from art, in art, including art, inside art, into art, like art, minus art, near art, next to art, notwithstanding art, of art, off art, on art, onto art, opposite art, out of art, outside art, over art, pace art, past art, per art, qua art, regarding art, since art, through art, throughout art, to art, towards art, under art, underneath art, unlike art, until art, upon art, versus art, via art, with art, within art and without art (and vice-versa). I assume that the act of writing allows one to understand things that can only be understood when written, just as there are things that can only be understood in the presence of art. The relationship between writing about art and experiencing art do not exclude each other. But at the same time, neither can be completely subsumed by the other. And both contaminate one another.’

¹⁵⁹ Other such disciplines include Gender Studies, Queer Theory, and Memory Studies.

¹⁶⁰ Pettejohn accuses de Bolla of ‘drawing on positivistic data to justify the aesthetic experience’ in her review ‘Art Writing Now by T.J. Clark and Peter de Bolla’, *Art History*, 30(5) (2007), p. 772 in response to de Bolla’s *Art Matters*. See further discussion in Lloyd, ‘Conclusion: An After-Image’, in *Picturing Subjective Art Histories*.

¹⁶¹ Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 2007), p. 158.

¹⁶² Rendell, *Site Writing*, p. 7.

¹⁶³ In particular, see Grant and Rubin eds. ‘Creative Writing and Art History’; Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts* and ‘Writing with Images’ *James Elkins* (2013) <<http://305737.blogspot.co.uk>> [accessed 9 May 2013]; Clark, *The Sight of Death*; Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’s Spider*; Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’; Barolsky, ‘Writing Art History’, p. 398; Carrier, ‘Erwin Panofsky, Leo Steinberg, David Carrier’; Carrier, ‘Artcriticism–writing, Arthistory–writing, Artwriting’, pp. 401–403.

distant' (James Elkins) or narrow and inflexible (Gavin Parkinson).¹⁶⁴ Paul Barolsky unleashed a scathing attack on it in 1996 when he wrote:

Art-historical writing is for the most part clotted with jargon and larded with cliché, impenetrable in its density, analytic and contentious to a fault, and worst of all, utterly predictable. Too often lugubrious, the industrialised prose of art history is a sorry affair. This fact is well known to some art historians and even one editor of this journal [*The Art Bulletin*] recently asked, if somewhat perfunctorily, where had "the poetry" gone from such writing?

Foregrounding the writing of art history gives 'the impression of unseriousness, even frivolousness, that their prose be mistaken for "bellettrism" or "appreciation"'.¹⁶⁵

Research which gives primacy to the method of its writing appears, in short, *weak*, a value judgment that evidences, according to Rita Felski, a broader 'legitimation crisis that is affecting all of the humanities'.¹⁶⁶ It is no coincidence, then, that similarly value-laden phrasing echoes through fictocriticism, a discipline which Helen Flavell attempts to define as allowing 'moments of weakness, failure and doubt' to show through its material of research rather than hiding behind 'the objective and pseudo-scientific language of academic discourse'.¹⁶⁷ I will come to discuss the idea of weakness in scholarship at greater length in chapter 3 in relation to Wai Chee Dimock.

What follows is perhaps one answer to Barolsky's dream of an art history that, at least sometimes, describes 'works of art vividly, indeed beautifully', that is 'learned, imaginative, sensible, theoretically sophisticated, well wrought, and thus worthy of the very art it celebrates', that is 'artful, [and] a pleasure to read'.¹⁶⁸ I make no claims for this being always the case; I can but try. My primary concern, however, is not the grace, beauty or lack thereof, of art history writing. Rather I am trying to gauge what a responsive art history – by which I mean an approach to art history that develops its character, sensitivity, style, and means of understanding through a responsive

¹⁶⁴ Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry and Distant Texts*, p. xx; Gavin Parkinson, 'The Delvaux Mystery: Painting the *Nouveau Roman* and Art History', *Nottingham French Studies*, 51(3) (2012), p. 299.

¹⁶⁵ Barolsky, 'Writing Art History', p. 398.

¹⁶⁶ Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 21.

¹⁶⁷ Flavell, 'Writing-Between', p. 23.

¹⁶⁸ Barolsky, 'Writing Art History', p. 400.

relationship with its referents, that is aware of, even thrives on, its position as creator and mediator of experience – can bring to the table of scholarship at large.

But does that not make this thesis art criticism rather than art history? Though it is beyond my scope to dwell on this distinction it is worth alluding to some of the ways in which scholars characterise or situate writing that does not sit wholly comfortably in one or other camp. Michael Baxandall, for example, uses the terms ‘art history’ and ‘art criticism’ interchangeably.¹⁶⁹ Richard Wollheim attacks art history precisely because its emphasis on historicising has led to an erosion of criticality.¹⁷⁰ For Michael Ann Holly writers like Pater and Ruskin are ‘branded aesthetes or mere critics’ and ‘dismissed from the cannon of serious art historians’; critics and criticism, by implication, become lesser than historians and history.¹⁷¹ Ivan Gaskell, in an article combatively entitled, ‘Writing (and) Art History: Against Writing’, distinguishes criticism and art history claiming that the critical belongs in museums as a form of interpretation.¹⁷² More useful for my purposes is Elsner’s argument for the descriptive foundations of art history. He concedes that while ‘not everything that results from ekphrasis is art history’, ‘interpretative description, which attempts to make a coherent argument on broadly historical or philosophical lines, is definitely art history’.¹⁷³ While mindful of the dangers of interpretation, as chapter 2 discusses, much of what follows is an attempt to articulate – often through expanded descriptions – the feeling of encounters with and between art and text. I have partially addressed the question of whether this thesis constitutes ‘a coherent argument’. I have framed this thesis, after Oakeshott, as primarily a conversation rather than an argument so I will allow myself to recast the question: is what follows a *coherent conversation*? The matter of coherence will resurface at various intervals in this thesis but to have too close an eye on it from the

¹⁶⁹ Michael Baxandall, ‘The Language of Art History’, *New Literary History*, 10(3) (1979), p. 455.

¹⁷⁰ Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), p. 9.

¹⁷¹ Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013). She puts this dismissal down to Pater and Ruskin’s ‘reception of the sublime, almost threatening the power of the past that their detractors fear’, p. 64.

¹⁷² Ivan Gaskell, in ‘Writing (and) Art History: Against Writing’, in ‘Writing (and) the History of Art’, *The Art Bulletin*, 78(3) (1996). See also Richard Shiff, ‘Flexible Time: The Subject in/of Art History’, *The Art Bulletin*, 76(4) (1994); Carrier, ‘Artcriticism–writing, Arthistory–writing, Artwriting’; Elkins and Newman eds., *The State of Art Criticism*.

¹⁷³ Elsner, ‘Art History as Ekphrasis’, p. 11.

start, errs on the side of caution, and risks limiting our thinking, closing down its possibilities. This thesis is about seeing what happens when, instead, we follow our nose.

Chapter 2

‘Stray Associations’ and Interpretation:

Francisco de Zurbarán’s, *Still Life with Four Vessels* and Susan Sontag

An idea which is a distortion may have a greater intellectual thrust than the truth; it may serve the needs of the spirit, which vary. The truth is balance, but the opposite of truth, which is unbalance, may not be a lie.¹

Susan Sontag

¹ Susan Sontag, ‘Simone Weil’, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 50.

Introduction

In the cavernous heart of Tate Modern a group of people press as though driven by some urgent impulse. They throng, diverge and reconverge in a *melée*, individuals peeling off, sporadically, pursuing conversations with passersby. Their energy is concentrated by their mass. Expansive and restless, they experiment with various ways to probe the space around them through movement and stillness: they jog up and down in dispersed waves; they swirl scattering and weaving; they stand, sit or lie contemplatively; they dance or march backwards in unison. They court the space around them for three months, filling its cavity with their breathing, their footsteps, their voice, their song. They are like some volatile substance, constantly reacting and interacting with the space, light, and architecture of the building, as well as with each other, with the gallery audience and, at a remove, with Tino Sehgal, the artist who set off this strange train of non-events.

It is at yet another remove that I relate these goings-on, as Sehgal forbade any recording, visual or written of the artwork. I did not see any of the performance and rely on illicit YouTube recordings of the events, personal written accounts from participants in the artwork and critical reviews. It is a game of Chinese whispers; only partially recorded for posterity, imperfectly chronicled, fragmented and reimagined through snippets of blurred video recordings, courtroom sketches, and by word of mouth or paper or screen. The myth of *These associations* (Tate Modern, London, 2012) (fig. 2) is allowed free reign by reflection, unconstrained by historical or critical veracity, built up of partial impressions.

Sehgal's team was made up of well-rehearsed non-professional actors, one of whom described the group as 'only the human clay [Sehgal] worked with'.² His 'constructed situations', though closely managed by the artist, make space for arrangements of movement, speech and practised instruction to act as a framework within which further

² Agnieszka Gratza, 'Conversation Pieces', *Frieze*, 152 (Jan–Feb 2013) <<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/conversation-pieces/>> [accessed 1 June 2013] (para. 9 of 9).

spontaneous activity plays out.³ It is a spectacle in which the audience is invited to immerse itself. It is at once theatrical, rehearsed and worldly, such as when the lights of the turbine hall are all turned off and then back on again in time with a choral performance. But it is also mundane, spontaneous and personal, like the quieter interactions that take place between individuals as they break away from the flock. The piece is supple, it is uncertain, present and responsive as its performance permeates, by degrees, the life of the Turbine Hall.

The underlying sentiment for the form and content of this chapter, and the project more widely, is akin to the uncertainties of *These associations*. Both share a singularity of focus, the Turbine Hall for Sehgal, Francisco de Zurbarán's *Still Life with Four Vessels* (fig. 1) for me, though neither solicit the coherence of a single interpretation or end point.⁴ Instead they rove around their subject matters by staging points of contact, offering up the meeting of disparate bodies and artworks to interrogation, sustained over time. A series of 'constructed situations' follow which choreograph various interpretations of Zurbarán's *Four Vessels*.

Section 1 roams in and around this single painting. It takes as its starting point the painting's wonder and lure, or as Barthes would call it, its punctum, that 'element which rises from the scene, shoots like an arrow, and pierces me'.⁵ I focus on the materiality of the painting. I probe its magnetism, its capacity to stimulate and its ambiguities as they arise through my sustained contact with it. I begin with an enactment of the drama that takes place when 'free' viewing is sculpted by its articulation in the form of a written response, before opening up the floor to other Zurbarán scholars and later to Susan Sontag in order to explore the extra interpretative layers that the written word lends to the shape, tone and imagery of response.

³ The term 'constructed situations' is referred to by Matthew Engelke in 'Matthew Engelke on Tino Sehgal, *Frieze Blog* (4 September 2013) <<http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/matthew-engelke-on-tino-sehgal>> [accessed 6 September 2013] (paras. 1 and 2 of 12).

⁴ I shall continue to refer to this still life as *Four Vessels*. The attribution of this painting to Francisco de Zurbarán is contested with some scholars like César Pemán believing it to be by Juan de Zurbarán, and Paul Guinard believing it to be a collaboration as discussed by Julián Gállego, *Francisco de Zurbarán, 1598-1664*, biography and analysis Julián Gállego; catalogue of works José Guidol, Kenneth Lyons trans. (London: Secker and Warburg, 1977), p. 50.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Richard Howard trans. (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 27.

Section 2 looks at how this kind of ‘free’ affective response connects to and departs from other responses to Zurbarán’s still life. I set the stage for some examples of art-historical and critical approaches to the painting: one symbolist, one historicist, one connoisseurial and the other marxist. I draw out what the distinct methodologies bring to the table asking what each adds or takes away.⁶

When none of these accounts wholly satisfy, I look, in section 3, to an exterior figure, at a remove from this particular still life yet whose polemic about the limitations of interpretations suggest another way of working with it. Sontag never wrote on Zurbarán but her way of writing about art enables me to approach his work with fresh eyes, in the same way that, for example, Pettejohn’s practice of moving around an artwork brings fresh perspective.⁷ Though Pettejohn makes her point about sculpture, my study of a single painting also moves constantly through and around it. So instead of contextualising it as Spanish, as still life, as interior, as a Zurbarán, as seventeenth-century I introduce a hypothetical Sontagian angle to probe the character and function of interpretation and allow me to see and think both Zurbarán’s painting and Sontag’s writing anew.

The chapter imagines what Sontag would have made of *Four Vessels* and what her hypothetical interpretation might add to the limited scholarship on this painting. That interpretation comes about, of course, through me, and my reading of Sontag, recasting her criticism in ways that relate to Zurbarán’s paintings, but which, as with all scholarship, comes about in my own words. My role is something like a ventriloquist,

⁶ Francisco Calvo Serraller and Mirian Alzuri, *El Bodegón Español de Zurbarán a Picasso* (Bilbao: Museo de Bellas Artes Bilbao, 1999); Gállego, *Francisco de Zurbarán* (1977), p. 50; Mathew Abbot, ‘All that is Solid Melts into Air’, (First Draft Gallery: Sydney, 2012) <http://firstdraftgallery.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Mathew_Abbott_Text_Pages_A5.pdf> [accessed 14 January 2013], pp. 5–6; Jonathan Brown, *Francisco de Zurbarán* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 19.

⁷ In Pettejohn’s recent study of the relationship between Greek sculpture and modern art she advises that ‘every time we think we are getting the measure of the object of study, we should move around it to see what another view will bring’, see Pettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture*, p. 251.

activating and redirecting Sontag's modernist criticism towards this seventeenth-century still life painting.⁸

What follows takes place through the assumption of voices by disassociated bodies. Think of this text as, in part, a 'vocalic body', then. Steven Connor describes how 'voices are produced by bodies: but can also themselves produce bodies.' A vocalic body of text, in this case, can assume the form 'of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice'.⁹ This chapter seeks to hear anew the voices of those who inhabit it through a body of text, my body of text, as it unfolds. Here, two interrelated surrogate bodies meet through, what David Goldblatt – in reference, incidentally, to Gertrude Stein – calls an 'awareness that overflow[s] the self'. It involves, he continues, 'being two selves simultaneously, [...] being conscious of oneself and beside oneself as well'.¹⁰ This metaphor serves to demonstrate the way in which multiple voices fill the cavity of their secondary bodies, 'not just to enter or suffuse it, but to produce it' in practice. Through this practice, my voice fills a body, a cavity that is formed when bringing a painting and text into some kind of contingent relation and experiencing, and attempting to convey, its affects. What results is an 'imaginary body in the course of being found and formed' and what is being found and formed here is the enactment of research through the emergence of thought.¹¹

This ventriloquism works through the potentially awkward association of Sontag's writing and Zurbarán's painting: drawing the two into orbit expounds on both and, as an approach, is a further instance of my efforts to free the constraints of seeing art history as a puzzle to be put back together in the 'right' places. The historical and causal disconnect between these two protagonists allows room to explore what is at stake for the writer and thinker of art histories: what role does the art historian play in dwelling

⁸ For scholarship on ventriloquism see: Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); David Goldblatt, *Art and Ventriloquism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); Valentine Vox, *I Can See Your Lips Moving: The History and Art of Ventriloquism* (North Hollywood CA: Plato Publishing, 1993).

⁹ Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 35.

¹⁰ Goldblatt, *Art and Ventriloquism*, p. 39.

¹¹ Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 36.

on Sontag's aesthetics through Zurbarán's painting, my encounter with Zurbarán's painting, and examples of art history's encounters with the painting? At the nub of this discussion are the intersections between these elements.¹²

The chapter would be unthinkable without Aby Warburg's concept of *Nachleben* and the survival and unfolding of an artwork beyond itself, and a single moment. It also owes much to Gaston Bachelard's notion that 'the *onset of the image* in an individual consciousness can help us to restore the subjectivity of images and to measure their fullness, their strength and their transsubjectivity'.¹³ It registers responses to artworks as a buildup of impressions around *Four Vessels* – my own, those of Zurbarán scholars and Sontag's – not to resolve them, but to allow them to gestate, to prove, to go beyond themselves. I am interested in what happens when we seek to grasp such fleeting associations – something Sehgal sought not to allow – concretising, fixing them in words and ideas which intersect on the critical stage, coalescing in the form of writing around the painting. It is, as Didi-Huberman put it, 'to proceed dialectically. Beyond knowledge itself, to commit ourselves to the paradoxical ordeal not to *know* [...] but to *think* the element of not-knowledge that dazzles us whenever we pose our gaze to an art image'.¹⁴

Section 1: Thinking *Still Life with Four Vessels*

Zurbarán's *Four Vessels* is disarming. Its structure, six vessels arranged in a row along a shelf, is simple; its forms, stark; its colour palette, pared down yet emphatic; its rendering, crisp but with subtle, visible brush strokes describing the various curvatures and the light and shadows that fall and hug each vessel in turn. Yet its seeming simplicity belies its ambiguity: its lighting is dramatic though its subject matter mundane; it is uncompromisingly choreographed, in line, deliberate and precise,

¹² Wolfgang Iser, 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', *New Literary History*, 3(2) (1972).

¹³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. xiv.

¹⁴ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 7.

complete with shelf as stage and deep black backdrop for contrast. As a whole it is characterised by its forceful reticence.

Its initial impact is forthright. With its single perspective it appears to offer a Cartesian unified view of the world, contained, ordered and classifiable. But there are two aspects of the painting that invite an alternative to the combative straight-on view of six vessels aligned: light and shade. As the eye shifts, lead by the strength of the light that issues from beyond the left side of the image, the absence of shadows are, oddly, brought into relief. Although all of the painted containers are sculpted through a mimetic use of *chiaroscuro* it is revealing that, apart from the bronze goblet on the left hand side, the vessels cast shadow only on the shelf below them and not on each successive vessel.¹⁵ The vessels themselves have an uncertain relationship to the light. On the one hand they appear reliant on the exterior beam to cast localised shadow. On the other, the absence of whole cast shadows lends them a near abstracted glow. The relationship between light, shadows and objects is entirely separated from the background which appears hermetically sealed.

The force of this painting pivots on its uncompromising poise, its absolute stillness. Unlike Willem Kalf's *Still Life with Drinking-Horn* (National Gallery, London, 1653) or Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's *The Skate* (The Louvre, Paris, 1725–6) which, in their different ways, bristle with life and action. Choreographed but in a naturalistic, faux-casual way their cloths are thrown nonchalantly over the table, Kalf's lemon peel is on the point of falling to the floor, Chardin's kitten is about to make short work of those oysters. Zurbarán, however, pulls back and slows down. Rather than being frozen, on the brink of further activity, his still life conveys a focused, meditative poise.¹⁶ He declares the ordinary reality of the unreality of his subject matter and celebrates it. Here are some pots, he declares. Here. Are. Some. Pots. They are not used as architectural underpinning for other more meaningful objects to hang around. There is no ostentation, no great colour, tonal or textual variation to cushion our viewing. Its composition of six

¹⁵ Museo Nacional del Prado, <<http://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/still-life/>> accessed 14/09/12> [accessed September 2012] (para. 2 of 4).

¹⁶ A characteristic also identified by Amanda Robins in 'Slow Art: Meditative Process in Painting and Drawing' (University of New South Wales: PhD dissertation, 2006), p. 79, (published Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009).

domestic objects is uncompromising. The only thing he offers to help carry the eye from one object to the next is the partial shadow cast by each object in turn. The vessels themselves appear almost empty, lifeless and, largely, plain. But Zurbarán lines them along an even plainer dead-brown shelf, before an unctuous, black background. And so, in the spotlight of the signature mannerist light source the unassuming pots hum.

The painting's simplicity is subsumed by its lingering abstracted and aestheticized naturalism. Mimetic naturalism matters less than Zurbarán's stripping back of details by the beam that alights onto pots devoid of natural shadow. His combinations of colour, form and unfathomable tension feel both instinctive and artful.¹⁷ Naturalism makes way for a rigorous meditation on forms whose emotional and intellectual reach unfolds beyond the confines of the specific with which we could be mistaken for thinking this painting to be concerned. What stands out is as much what is not there as what is: the absence of those mutually grounding shadows, the near empty vessels (containers that, mostly, do not contain) and the limited inclusion of readable context, save for the wooden shelf or table. The vessels exude a discomfiting warm glow: approachable in their modesty and the overall earthy tones and yet cold in their bare, near regimented, unnatural alignment. To the eye they feel like rounded, tactile objects, yet the shadows that would substantiate their solidity are absent. They are objects of use and yet that use has been almost eliminated. They lie in wait. There is no food on the plates, no flowers in the vases, just a subtle waterline suspended in the rightmost white urn. The vessels are frozen, even illuminated, in their inutility.

Four Vessels recalls Damien Hirst's *Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same Direction for the Purpose of Understanding (Left)* (Prada Collection, Milan, 1991) (fig. 3) which consists of a cabinet of fish preserved in separate cuboids, all facing left. Hirst's elements are frozen in formaldehyde, Zurbarán's pots, in oil paint. The works share the linear repetition of forms that belong to the same family but are also different. In both, the viewpoint is ambiguous. They achieve a straight *re*-presentation of forms without the distraction of further context. Zurbarán's pots are placed on an unremarkable

¹⁷ I am aware of the formalist leanings of this sentence. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to tackle the issue of formalism at length but the matter is broadly referenced in my first chapter.

wooden shelf, Hirst's fish in a utilitarian white cabinet with riveted shelving system. Compare the way that this sense of detachment is undermined by the light that suffuses Zurbarán's painting, and by Hirst's presentation of once living beings in glass coffins. Of course there are differences in size and media, and the overall brightness of Hirst's cabinet compared to Zurbarán's painting is striking. Yet the artists' presentation of forms all but devoid of one of their principle functions – fish to swim and vessels to contain – builds up a sense of dismal uselessness: useless matter shelved. In both artworks, this underlying bleakness belies the beauty of their execution and they become ethereal after-still-lives.

Drawing on Hirst to develop a critical appraisal of Zurbarán might seem an anachronistic step too far. Yet, rather than quell these associations or, as Richard Wollheim put it, wait for 'the stray associations and motivated misconceptions to settle down', I wonder at the understanding we might derive from these so-called strays.¹⁸ The discussion of Hirst in this context would be considered by Wollheim to be one such stray, brought about through efforts to communicate the effect of Zurbarán's image on or through or with me. Might such strays work in a similar way to Stephen Bann's detours? 'One never gets to the heart of a problem', Bann tells us, 'without taking detours'.¹⁹ Admittedly, he was not referring to such subjective associations, but I might, perhaps, borrow the sentiment?

My 'stray associations' are obvious to begin with. Zurbarán's still life calls to mind Giorgio Morandi and his innumerable collections of pots arranged and rearranged in various conglomerations, engaged in various visual conversations, abstracted though indomitably mundane and earthly. Is it just the shared subject matter that links the two? Compare, for example, Morandi's rough painterly handling to Zurbarán's smooth; or Morandi's often flat (or at any rate washed out), compared to Zurbarán's dramatic, use of lighting; or Morandi's obsession with the repetition of vessels compared to Zurbarán's infrequent (though no less intense) iterations. No, what brings the two artists together in my mind is their approach to composition in which formal arrangements of

¹⁸ Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, p. 8.

¹⁹ Stephen Bann, *The Inventions of History: Essays on the Representation of the Past* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 10.

pots are presented, often (though not exclusively for Morandi) in lines. The sculptural objects depicted are, in both cases, compressed in space, de-characterised through their strict choreography.

From here the mind wanders, side stepping to Giorgio de Chirico and his dramatic use of light sources, his stark forms, his emotional detachment, his selection of found (often familiar) objects made strange by their recontextualization in new and alien landscapes and his love of combining natural colours – whites, creams, browns and blacks –with a hit of bright colour, a bunch of yellow bananas or an oversized burnt sienna glove.

These associations come about not only because of their visual likenesses. To link two pieces of otherwise seemingly incomparable artworks based merely on their visual properties might appear problematic. Considered facile, arbitrary and formalist, how could the comparison of artworks be put to useful art-historical work without the imposition of an overarching theme, purpose or method? What might we learn from them? What happens when the links between one artwork and another are distant ‘reverberations’, in the sense that Bachelard has used the term, as distant a-chronological traces and historically incoherent and irrational impressions or analogies? By exploring the possible interest elicited by the evocation of shared feelings about artworks that are historically, thematically and formally separate, I hope to prize apart the echoes that issue forth from one artwork to touch on another and discuss their impact one by one.

It is important to emphasise that I am not suggesting that any of my ‘strays’ are necessarily intentionally ‘there’ in the painting. I do not consider them concrete references deliberately placed (by the artist) that preexist my observations but as loose serendipitous post factum analogies drawn out from viewer response. I am interested in the process that has been referred to as ‘the onset’ of the artworks’ bodily, not just visual, effect on the viewer as not only a personal but intellectual pursuit. I see this as a mode of intercommunication, a sharing and developing of embodied understanding of artworks in relation to each other, to ourselves, and to art histories. In this context understanding might better be described as *active assimilation* conveying the

subconscious, fragmentary and necessarily subjective way with which external stimuli permeate our view of the world.

To return to *Four Vessels*, then, the overwhelming solidity with which Zurbarán imbues his vessels is striking, despite the incomplete cast shadows. Boldly set forward from the rich black background one senses the vessels roundness, their textured smoothness and their relative isolation in unidentified space. The limpid rendering of their forms is humanly imperfect and gently naturalistic. Despite the warm yellow unearthly light, the coldness of those metal plates abides: the imaginary sharp clang of metal against metal, plate against goblet, a tone soon absorbed by the solidity of the wooden shelf. The shelf functions as a crucial grounding in colour and density. The shiny glaze of the two cream white vessels also compares to the dull surface of the burnt sienna vase. I can anticipate the feeling of running my hand over these vases. The orange one, dry, offering a dusty resistance compared to the cooler effect of my skin slipping off the glaze of the cream-white urn.

However ambiguous its overall effect its composition is unwrought yet it elicits a calm, contemplative, and visceral reception. One senses the brush strokes, the gentle coaxing of forms from pigment, the embracing of their rounded curvatures in the hand. Its forthright definition lends gravity to what is unmistakably, a painting of six simple vessels in a row. It is partly the vessels' decommissioning that allows for our imaginative re-commissioning of them, they demand contemplative access beyond a predetermined hermeneutic outcome. As such the painting functions like an open-work which is partly why it has induced so many stray associations here.

This method of viewing 'touchingly' also relates to the familiarity with which Zurbarán depicts his objects.²⁰ They appear mundane (the brass goblet with seahorses for handles perhaps notwithstanding) though in their current configuration, their utility redundant,

²⁰ On a modes of synaesthetic and embodied viewing and theorising see: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Peter Osborne ed., *From an Aesthetic Point of View: Philosophy, Art and the Senses* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2001); Peter Dent ed., *Sculpture and Touch* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2014); Francesca Bacci and David Melcher eds., *Art and the Senses* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jennifer Fisher, 'Relational sense: towards a haptic aesthetics', *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine*, 87 (1997).

their standing has somehow surpassed their original function. Like a Wolfgang Tillmans photograph where unremarkable black socks are piled to dry on an unremarkable white radiator, the ordinary appears momentous (fig. 4). Free from their original purposes, either to protect feet or contain flowers, intensified by the close focus upon them, abstracted from their whole story, these objects are encouraged to metamorphose before you. The intimacy of the view allows the spectator more of a grasp, or at least the possible partial assimilation, of the objects. This is not just about an overturning of the hierarchy of art's subject matter either. In the case of Tillmans and Zurbarán their objects are at once themselves and something else. Tillmans's socks seem less overtly choreographed, found rather than placed, as Zurbarán's clearly are. Of course photographs, however unpremeditated in appearance, are always framed by the eye and the lens but Tillmans saves his 'high composition' for the installation of his works en masse through exhibitions where his works are thoroughly ordered, arranged to spark interrelations between themselves, as Zurbarán's vases do within the confines of a single painting. And Tillmans's light may be less dramatic, less theatrical than that which bathes Zurbarán's vessels; he favours a bland, uniform white light which is less laden with narrative overtones, but it is the analogy between Tillmans's and Zurbarán's transformation from the functional mundane to the beautifully abstract that brings them together.

That sounds as if the mundane cannot be abstract or the functional not beautiful. Perhaps what is remarkable about these artists' handling of their subject matters is their expansive approach. My being able to point to, through and beyond Zurbarán's still life is brought about through sustained dwelling on and around the painting. It does not stop at this individual painting, and certainly does not foreclose it by presuming to identify a particular meaning. The sense of dwelling on suggests an unfolding or witnessing of the effect of the artwork in its state of constant becoming. Responding to artwork is highly sensitive: it is receptive, actively industrious and often subconscious, which is why writing through responses helps to prize apart, as well as to reconstruct. It is sensitive to time as well as physical, intellectual and emotional environment. Being mindful of these factors and allowing them to play out, instead of stifling them into submission, enables the artwork's rigorous assimilation within both a private and a public art-historical

narrative. In this constellation it acts as a trigger to, and ongoing mediator of, the discussion of other works. Just as my discussion in this chapter is not just about the response to a single painting but stretches beyond itself, so Tillmans and Zurbarán have produced art *of* objects where objects are represented in a way that augments the objects' qualities beyond themselves, rather than constraining them in their objecthood.

For Roland Barthes, 'the pleasure of the text is that moment when [his] body pursues its own ideas'.²¹ Subjective associations are similarly expansive. Might such strays point towards qualities and ideas within and beyond the artwork, not in the intentionalist vein that Wollheim would insist on, but as pictorial and critical serendipities, thematic threads sewn not just by and through the artist but by and through the art historian too?

Section 2: Enter writing around Zurbarán

This is one of a myriad ways of being with *Four Vessels* but what can other approaches bring to the painting? The following section presents four different approaches to its interpretation: symbolist, historicist, connoisseurial, and marxist. The examples are taken from a variety of contexts – a catalogue entry, an essay to accompany a contemporary exhibition or as incidental asides – and are, therefore, not like for like but their coming together here functions to illustrate what extant approaches to the painting contribute and also leave out.

The catalogue entry in *Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso* (2006) situates *Four Vessels* within its geographic, temporal and cultural context. It touches only summarily on the vessels' appearance describing them as 'like a frieze, on a board parallel to the frontal plane' and 'according to a Caravaggesque tradition'. The omission of the vessels' cast shadows is seen as a 'slight incongruence' evidence of Zurbarán's process, studying the objects separately and then combining them to achieve 'a perfectly balanced composition'.²²

²¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Richard Miller trans. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 17.

²² Carmen Giménez and Francisco Calvo Serraller eds., *Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso: Time, Truth and History*, exhib. cat. (November 2006–Spring 2007) (SEACEX / Solomon R. Guggenheim, 2006), unspecified catalogue entry author, p. 102 and Felix Scheffler, *Das spanische Stilleben des 17. Jahrhunderts. Theorie, Genese und Entfaltung einer Bildgattung* (Frankfurt: Vervuert, 2000), p. 341.

The entry's principal focus is on *Four Vessels* as a celebration of Sevillian cultural identity. Referencing Felix Scheffler's research it sees Zurbarán as 'paying homage to the city, which was famous for its pottery manufacturing'. He identifies each pot: 'The two white jars were made locally, and were known as *alcarrazas*, or eggshell, for their thin white clay. The *alcarrazas* flank a wide-bellied bottle with a long neck, made from red Portuguese or South American clay.' Its interest in the painting lies predominantly in the ways that the vessels are 'symbols of Seville, they identify its economic welfare and form part of the hagiography of its patrons, Saints Justa and Rufina'.²³ Justa and Rufina became martyrs after they were tortured, imprisoned and killed for refusing to sell their earthenware pottery to locals for use in pagan festivals. Accordingly, though Scheffler does not fully draw it out, *Four Vessels*, appears to reveal its socio-historic lineage with pious Counter Reformation sentiment and symbolism. Scheffler's approach reveals a belief in the almost pre-determined nature of the form, content, and interpretation of the artwork. The painting's original socio-historical context is taken as a means of explanation; it accounts, not only for *what* the painting depicts, but *how* that depiction appears on the canvas. The painting is considered not on its own terms but as an illustration of its biographic, geographic and cultural emergence.

Mathew Abbot resituates *Four Vessels* within a rather different cultural and theoretical framework. In a slim 2012 exhibition catalogue for *First Draft Gallery* in Sydney he compares it with Giorgio Morandi's *Still life* (Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Siegen, 1962).²⁴ In contrast to the Giménez and Serraller catalogue entry, Abbot understands Zurbarán's omission of cast shadows onto the pots themselves, not as incongruous but as evidencing each vessel's 'solidity, clarity, and distinctness, indeed as radiantly unique'. Compare this, Abbot tells us, to Morandi's objects which are 'blandly anonymous, flattened, and washed out'. Here is a further comparison: 'The objects in the Zurbarán catch the light dramatically, and each glows out from the background; the objects in the Morandi are huddled together sheepishly, seeming about to fade into each

²³ Giménez and Serraller eds., *Spanish Painting from El Greco to Picasso*, p. 102. This reading relies heavily on Scheffler to whom I shall refer when referencing this particular reading from here on in, see Scheffler, *Das spanische Stilleben*, p. 341.

²⁴ Abbot, 'All that is Solid Melts into Air'.

other (notice how some of them share outlines) and threatening to merge amorphously with the background.²⁵ Though Abbot's comparisons between historically disparate artworks have interesting potential the discussion culminates in something of a dead end. In a sense his argument is an extension of Scheffler's, which sees Zurbarán's still life as a study of real objects put to everyday use in seventeenth-century Seville and depicted in all their integrity.

The purpose of his trans-historical comparison soon becomes clear:

[It] indicates what capitalist modernity does to things. As it produces and distributes them in historically unprecedented quantities, it makes them more ephemeral. For the flatness in Morandi is not only the result of an experiment with perspective or an acknowledgment of the two-dimensionality of the canvas: this flatness, this sense that things have lost their depth and distinctness, is one of the experiential features of the modern as we know it.²⁶

Abbot uses *Four Vessels* to draw out his overarching, marxist inflected, point. His juxtaposition of Zurbarán and Morandi function as an illustrative metaphor whereby, paradoxically, the uniqueness of their work becomes secondary. The paintings become as 'ephemeral' as the effect of the 'capitalist modernity' against which Abbot rails, and onto which his broader argument is hung. The paintings' presence, rendering, detail and feeling – what Abbot calls their 'depth and distinctness' – have been flattened out, subsumed by Abbot's own personal, political and theoretical propensities. This example serves as a reminder of what is lost in the use (or misuse) of art, through the temptation to *deploy* art like a weapon on the ruthless field of argumentation and persuasion by treating it interchangeably as document or artefact without scrutiny of its subtle formal components and emotional or intellectual effects.

Another comparative reading, this time by Julián Gállego, sees a move away from symbolism. Though, following Roberto Longhi, Gállego is convinced of the highly symbolic significance of a related painting by Zurbarán, *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges*

²⁵ Abbot, 'All that is Solid Melts into Air' p. 5.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 6.

and a Cup of Water (Norton Simon Museum, 1633) (fig. 5).²⁷ Longhi reads the presentation of objects in *Still Life with Lemons* as configured in the manner of an altar, a kind of litany to the Virgin Mary. And Gállego cites the citrus fruit and flower, the rose and the water as symbolising chastity, love and purity respectively as evidence of the painting's homage.²⁸ On the matter of *Four Vessels*, however, Gállego's approach diverges. Here he attempts no such prescriptively symbolic reading and instead anthropomorphises Zurbarán's vessels. They 'have the presence of living characters', he writes, just as 'Zurbarán's characters have the presence of earthen pots'. He goes on to refer to the general nature and style of all of Zurbarán's still lifes, as if they were somehow interchangeable. In this respect Gállego's handling of the still life is comparable with Abbot's, rendering his analysis likewise guilty of flattening out the painting's particularities.

What is interesting about Gállego's analysis, however, is that, surprisingly, given his straightforward breakdown of the *Still Life with Lemons*, he is one of the few art historians to recognise the way in which Zurbarán's still lifes affect a current viewer. In order to account for their broad appeal to an 'art lover now' – in the 1970s – Gállego identifies 'objects, divorced from their context in a deliberate abnormality', as well as the 'sober, monumental style' and the "“implacable objectivity of Zurbarán's objects”" as being key attractions to the modern psyche. He argues that such qualities are comparable with those found in Cézanne, Cubism, or 'Surrealist, magic-realist and Hyper-realist objects'. In revisioning Zurbarán's paintings of plates and pots in a relationship of closeness with a contemporary audience his anthropomorphising monumentalises the still lifes, raising them to a level of essentialism: 'It is only when we see one of these still lifes', he says, 'that we realize that being a fruit, a cup, a napkin, a plate or an earthen pot is something almost as essential as being a man.'²⁹

²⁷ Roberto Longhi 'De Zurbarán', in *Los antiguos pintores españoles de la colección Contini Bonacossi* Augusto L. Mayer ed., (Milan: Bestetti e Tumminelli, 1930), pp. 39–40. Henceforth I will abbreviate *Still Life with Lemons*, *Oranges and a Cup of Water* to *Still Life with Lemons*.

²⁸ William B. Jordan and Sarah Schroth eds., *Spanish Still Life in the Golden Age, 1600-1650* (Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum and Toledo Museum of Art, 1985), p. 20.

²⁹ Gállego, *Francisco de Zurbarán*, p. 50.

By contrast, Jonathan Brown takes a part-historicist, part-connoisseurial approach.³⁰ He frequently refers to the way in which Zurbarán's work is reflective of the artist's time and place. He describes the narrative of the artist's life as one of 'humble beginnings [which rose ...] to exalted heights, and then drifted slowly down to a melancholy end' and where taste and patronage 'help to *explain* the trajectory and character and evolution of his religious art'.³¹ With regard to his still lifes, however, Brown has something quite other to say. He expressly rejects any symbolic reading of these works (such as Gállego's of *Still Life with Lemons*). For Brown the still lifes (and he is referring to them in general terms) are, rather, 'examples of intensive artistic concentration'. But by the same hand, their value is also demoted to studies for Zurbarán's principle religious oeuvres in which 'still life elements were meant to assist the illusion of commonplace reality, but the strong emphasis given them elevated the simple objects to almost equal stature with the figures, so that even non-symbolic *accessories seem* charged with meanings'.³² Brown is clear that any symbolic reading is at most illusory, a mistake on the part of the viewer.

In the catalogue entry for *Four Vessels* in Baticle's exhibition catalogue the painting is briefly described in comparison to *Still-life with Lemons* and its 'frieze-like disposition of the objects, [with] the same attention to the rendering of volume and the same way in which the objects are brilliantly lighted against a dark background'. There is no search for hidden meaning, social or historical contextualisation, rather the entry is written in the manner of a connoisseur focussing primarily on its attribution and dating.³³ From it, then, we learn very little about the painting itself, its materiality or affect. In fact

³⁰ In his essay in Jeannine Baticle, *Zurbarán*, exhib. cat. (September–December 1987) (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art 1987) Brown calls *Four Vessels*, *Still Life with Pottery and Cup*, referring to the Museu d'Art de Catalunya version. It is not ideal that he does not refer to the exact painting that is the focus of my study, though Brown calls the paintings 'identical' and claims that the differences between the images are 'negligible' his discussion remains pertinent to my overall discussion to overlook this discrepancy, pp. 246–247. His approach in this essay is largely historicist. In his book *Francisco de Zurbarán* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), in a catalogue entry, he refers to the The Prado version of *Four Vessels* as *Still Life with Jars*. This entry is almost entirely connoisseurial focussing largely on the attribution of the still life and coming to the conclusion it was probably 'done by Zurbarán at a level slightly below his best' (praise indeed!), p. 88.

³¹ Jonathan Brown, 'Patronage and Piety: Religious Imagery in the Art of Francisco de Zurbarán', in *Zurbarán*, Baticle ed., pp. 1–2, my emphasis.

³² Brown, *Zurbarán*, p. 78.

³³ Catalogue entry in Baticle, *Zurbarán*, pp. 246–247.

reference to the painting gets lost in a puzzle of detection about the true identity of its author, as if its biographic provenance holds the key to its interpretation. Its dating and attribution are presented as the endpoint of the discussion rather than a beginning, or even an aside. This is the kind of approach that Michael Ann Holly refers to, as ‘Whodunnit? Or whatisit?’ scholarship.³⁴

Section 3: Enter Susan Sontag

I would suggest that missing from the interpretations above is an attentive reading of the surface and form of *Four Vessels*. This shortfall renders these accounts sensuously arid, lacking visceral, emotive or aesthetic registers. All this despite the painting itself being generally considered emotionally attuned and of a ‘transcendent and mystical character’.³⁵ To put it another way, it is the ‘erotics’ of *Four Vessels*, as Susan Sontag would have it, that is lacking. The presence of an outsider to the conversation might pave the way for alternative critical possibilities and observations.

And so to Sontag, a further stray, entering stage left. She is, in some respects, an unlikely figure to introduce into a chapter on Zurbarán, about whom she never herself wrote. The value of a connection like this, that at first sight appears arbitrary, picks up on Sontag’s own approach to writing: ‘Everything that I write is fiction’ she proclaims, it is like going ‘on an adventure for the next sentence’.³⁶ Sontag’s spirit accords with the sense in which I am suggesting that art histories might be not a writing-up of research but a generation of research through the act of writing.

There are several other reasons to suppose that Sontag’s voice might be valuable in this discussion too. First, this chapter is not just about *Four Vessels*, but about interpretation

³⁴ Holly, ‘Mourning and Method’, p. 165.

³⁵ Brown, *Zurbarán*, p. 246. Norman Bryson also emphasises its ‘texture and tactility’, *Looking at the Overlooked* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 76. Amanda Robbins emphasises its tendency to point towards ‘transcendence in the everyday’, in Robbins, ‘Slow Art’, p. 83. And Robert Harvard notes that in Zurbarán’s paintings ‘naturalism and mysticism hold joint sovereignty, lucidity generating an exact representation of the humblest objects, otherworldliness (‘fuga’: flight) rendering them sublime and forlorn’, *The Spanish Eye* (Woodbridge: Tamesis Books, 2007), p. xiii.

³⁶ Susan Sontag in Jair Rattner, ‘Sontag diz que ha uma superpopulacao de escritores’, *Folha De S. Paulo* (28 May 1988), cited by Sohnya Sayres, ‘Susan Sontag and the Practice of Modernism’, *American Literary History*, 1 (1989), p. 610.

more broadly: what represents good (useful, expansive, imaginative) interpretation and what bad (prosaic, predictable, restrictive)? Sontag's rebuttal of historicist and symbolic readings of artworks offers a counterbalance to the approaches to *Four Vessels* considered in Section 2. Secondly, Sontag's self-conscious acknowledgment and navigation of herself as a medium for viewing, thinking and writing contribute to my broader theme of subjectivity because her personhood both activates and impedes her critical writing. Thirdly, through my ventriloquising of Sontag, her appearance adds an extra fictional layer to the discussion of the practice of interpretation. It enacts a hypothetical discussion with the critic around an image to which I think she would have been drawn.

Sontag's writing, like Zurbarán's still life, is intractable and perplexing. Both resonate with a strong sense of personal voice, which in both cases is highly ambiguous. They have a forthright address that is assertive and self deprecating, a tone that is acutely felt and intellectualised, an expressive quality that is at once rich and austere. Zurbarán is viewed by art history as, on the one hand, 'one of the three greatest masters of seventeenth-century Spanish painting' and, on the other, belonging to a 'lower class'.³⁷ Sontag is viewed as 'a popularist and obscurantist' in the same breath.³⁸ She is in turns lauded by some and criticised by others for being: a sensualist, a formalist, an anti-aestheticist, an artist critic, a publicist. Her contributions have been aligned at once with the Frankfurt School, 'The new Sensibility', Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Oscar Wilde,

³⁷ Baticle, *Zurbarán*, p. xiii and John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, Vol. 2, (Salt Lake City, UT.:The Project Gutenberg ebook, 2009), p. 188 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/30755/30755-h/30755-h.htm>> [accessed 6 October 2013].

³⁸ Phillip Lopate, *Notes on Sontag* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 18.

Roland Barthes, Mary McCarthy and Clement Greenberg.³⁹ Her characterisation of the relationship between form and content has been accused at once of being ‘sophomoric’ and ‘self defeating’.⁴⁰ Such variation in her reception has contributed to the erratic way in which her work has been assimilated by art history.

Since both Zurbarán and Sontag have been treated as to some degree outside the art-historical canon, as I will shortly discuss, my treatment of them functions to suggest modes of writing and interpretation that have, and remain, similarly undervalued in art history because of their supposed subjectivity. In order to gauge the reasons for this, as I do in Section 2 with Zurbarán, I need to build up a picture of Sontag’s academic reception that focuses on her critical methodology. When elements of her criticism, for example, are repeatedly praised or dismissed, misunderstood or exaggerated, we can start to think in specific terms about what subjectivity in art writing and interpretation has to offer. What are its shortcomings and values?

Though unfashionable, reinstalling some disciplinary boundaries reveals that despite being frequently included in art history textbooks, direct responses to Sontag’s oeuvre in the context of art history, criticism and philosophy have been largely unattributed or

³⁹ On Sontag as a sensualist see Robert Boyers, ‘On Susan Sontag and the New Sensibility’, *Salmagundi*, 1(3) (1966), p. 30 and Alice Kaplan, *Dreaming in French* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 224. On Sontag as a formalist see Thomas McEvelley, *Capacity: History, the World, and the Self in Contemporary Art and Criticism*, Roger G. Denson commentary (Amsterdam: OPA, 1996). On Sontag as anti-aestheticist see Michael Kelly, *A Hunger for Aesthetics: Enacting the Demands of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 18. For Sontag as Artist-Critic see Sohnya Sayres who argues that Sontag casts herself as ‘a formalist and an artist’, in ‘Susan Sontag and the Practice of Modernism’, p. 611. On Sontag as publicist see Irving Howe who described Sontag as a ‘brilliant publicist who makes brilliant quilts from Grandmother’s patches’, in ‘The New York Intellectuals’ (1990), p. 275 cited in James Penner, ‘Gendering Susan Sontag’s Criticism in the 1960s: The New York Intellectuals, the CounterCulture, and the Kulturkampf over “The New Sensibility”’, *Women’s Studies*, 37 (2008), p. 926. On Sontag in relation to the Frankfurt School see Fred Rush, ‘Appreciating Susan Sontag’, *Philosophy and Literature*, 33 (2009), p. 38. On Sontag and ‘The New Sensibility’ see Penner, ‘Gendering Susan Sontag’s Criticism’, p. 933. On Sontag in relation to Oscar Wilde see Jay Parini, ‘Review: Reading the Readers: Barthes and Sontag’, *The Hudson Review*, 36 (1983), p. 415; On Sontag in relation to Roland Barthes see Llewellyn Negrin, ‘Art and Philosophy: Rivals or partners?’, in *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 31(7) (2005), p. 818. On Sontag and Mary McCarthy see Norman Podhoretz who characterises Sontag as the ‘Dark Lady of American Letters, a position that had originally been carved out by Mary McCarthy in the thirties and forties.’, in Podhoretz, *Making It* (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 155 as cited in Penner, ‘Gendering Susan Sontag’s Criticism’, p.921. Boyers, though, finds the analogy between Sontag and McCarthy ‘absurd’, in Boyers, ‘On Susan Sontag and the New Sensibility’, p. 29. On Sontag and Clement Greenberg see McEvelley, *Capacity*, pp. 22–24.

⁴⁰ Parini, ‘Review: Reading the Readers’, p. 415 and McEvelley, *Capacity*, p. 34.

undervalued, though her influence is widely diffused.⁴¹ She is accepted as setting the table for the study of photography over the past thirty years, yet we should remind ourselves that for Sontag ‘all art aspires to the condition of photography’ and, therefore, much of what she says about photography applies to art more generally also.⁴² In the fields of English, Comparative Literature, French Studies and especially, in the newer disciplines of American Studies, Gender Studies and Women’s Studies her contribution has been appraised more fully.⁴³ The disciplinary imbalance of her reception is regrettable because, although she was known for only rarely lingering on the particularities of artworks – *On Photography*, as Cary Nelson points out, contains very few images and very little discussion of specific images⁴⁴ – her work dwells on the larger issues regarding what we do or should do with artworks; how they should be handled and negotiated by the critic; and the responsibility the critic has to them.⁴⁵

Sontag’s call for an ‘erotics of art’ appeared in 1967, six years earlier than Barthes’ discussion of ‘jouissance’ and ‘erotics of the text’ in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973 and

⁴¹ Her essay ‘Against Interpretation’ for example is reproduced in *Art History and its Methods: A Critical Anthology* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2006). But, on the undervaluing of Sontag, see Peggy Zeglin Brand and Mary Devereaux, ‘Introduction: Feminism and Aesthetics’, *Hypatia*, 18(4) (2003), p. xviii. And Boyers notes that ‘It has almost become the fashion to take swipes at [Sontag’s] critical strictures without ever mentioning her by name, or doing reasonable justice to her ideas’, in Boyers, ‘On Susan Sontag and the New Sensibility’, p. 30.

For an art-historical account of Sontag see Jae Emerling, *Photography: History and Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012); Leslie Luebbbers, ‘A Way of Feeling is a Way of Seeing: Sontag and the Visual Arts’, in *The Scandal of Susan Sontag*, Barbara Ching and Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); McEvelley, *Capacity*; Kelly, *A Hunger for Aesthetics*; Rush, ‘Appreciating Susan Sontag’.

⁴² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 149. This is surely a play on Walter Pater’s claim that ‘All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music’, in ‘The School of Giorgione’, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 135.

⁴³ See Sayres, ‘Susan Sontag and the Practice of Modernism’; Penner, ‘Gendering Susan Sontag’s Criticism’; Annalisa Zox-Weaver, ‘Introduction: Susan Sontag: an Act of Self-Creation’, *Women’s Studies*, 37 (2008); Angela McRobbie, ‘The Modernist Style of Susan Sontag’, *Feminist Review*, 38 (1991); G. F. Mitrano, ‘Sontag and the Europeans I’, *Women’s Studies*, 37 (2008); and Kaplan, *Dreaming in French*.

⁴⁴ Cary Nelson, ‘Soliciting Self-Knowledge: The Rhetoric of Susan Sontag’s Criticism’, *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (1980), p. 715.

⁴⁵ An interesting gauge of Sontag’s influence on art history is through anthologies of the discipline. Chris Murray’s collection does contain an entry on Sontag. Others like Eric Fernie’s *Art History and Its Methods* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995) include a brief introduction to Sontag’s ‘Against Interpretation’ with little sustained analysis. But her writing does not appear in either Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff’s *Critical Terms for Art History, Second Edition* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) or Donald Preziosi’s *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

1975 in English translation). Given the deeply embodied perspective implied by the term ‘erotics’, which taps into a current of recent scholarship that advocates a model of embodied study and to which I shall return, it is a wonder that art historians have not made more use of Sontag and her approach to interpretation.

There are various reasons why her body of work may not have been given due scholarly consideration by art historians. Sontag was a thoroughly interdisciplinary and historically wide-ranging reader, viewer, thinker and writer. Her intellectual reach should be considered intrinsic to her oeuvre, but it has often been mistaken for, at best, rhetoric, at worst, wilful obscurantism and exhibitionism.⁴⁶ Furthermore, her life acts as an abiding framework on which her writing is permanently hung.⁴⁷ Her biography, for example, looms large over Ching and Wagner-Lawlor’s 2009 collection which is teeming with references to her personhood and personal life: her magnetism, haughtiness, family life, celebrity, friends, lovers, predilections and illnesses.

In a thesis that explores the role of subjectivity in art history, one might wonder what the problem is here. She is the author of her work and therefore who she is must be as important as what she writes. But the subject of this thesis is the nature of a subject looking, thinking and writing about works of art rather than confessional subjectivities, as my chapter 1 made plain. My interest lies less in what feelings, tastes and opinions are generated by an encounter with artwork, and more on how those responses are manifested through writing; in where else those responses lead us; in the alteration that takes place during the reception and transmission of images, sensory stimuli, ideas and words. The study of the role of subjectivity is not borne of a researcher’s need to make sense of or justify her personal choices. Of greater interest is the subtle omnipresence of a subject that weaves its way through viewing and writing, that oscillates between

⁴⁶ Nelson, ‘Soliciting Self-Knowledge’, p. 720; Parini, ‘Review: Reading the Readers’, pp. 415–416.

⁴⁷ Studies that focus on Sontag’s personal life include Craig Seligman, *Sontag and Kael: Opposites Attract Me* (New York: Counterpoint, 2004); Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock, *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon* (New York: W. W. Norton Press, 2000); Ching and Wagner-Lawlor, *The Scandal of Susan Sontag* (2009); Sigrid Nunez, *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag* (London: Atlas, 2011).

conscious deployment and unconscious unraveling, between selflessness and self-exploration or even self-fulfilment, between rhetoric and intrinsic compulsion.⁴⁸

Section 3.1: Sontag's Formalism and Sensualism

It is revealing from the start that few scholars take seriously the philosophical implications of Sontag's art criticism.⁴⁹ Such scholarship that does exist centres on her perceived formalism and sensualism. Her formalism is the source of intense frustration for Thomas McEvelley who concentrates, almost entirely, on the distinction he takes her to be making between form and content where content is 'absorbed' by the sensuous aspects of form. For McEvelley, Sontag's solution to absorb content into form is 'self-defeating' because 'form can only exist as the form of a content, and content as the content of a form. The terms are distinguishable, though logically dependent on one another'. McEvelley's conception of formalism is crucial to his argument wherein form is characterised as sensory, aesthetic, optical (disembodied) and autonomous; content as conceptual, analytical, non-optical (embodied) and worldly. He accuses Sheldon Nodelman, for example, of presenting 'the birth of the art experience [as] a kind of virgin birth, bypassing both the body and the conceptual mind, and whispering its message directly into the ear of the critic's soul, like the angel of the Annunciation'.⁵⁰ He accuses formalists (Sontag included) of 'excluding non-optical elements from the work of art', which is 'not a real principle'. Interpretation, he insists, '*must* be compromised and, given the associative habit of the human mind, is *always* compromised'.⁵¹

In an argument that follows on from McEvelley's, Llewellyn Negrin values Sontag's impact on the robust study of the onset and lingering effect of artworks, but she also

⁴⁸ The distinction between subjective, auto-biographic and confessional writings is crucial and is set out more fully in chapter 1.

⁴⁹ Kelly, *A Hunger for Aesthetics*; Rush, 'Appreciating Susan Sontag'; and Negrin, 'Art and Philosophy: Rivals or partners?'.

⁵⁰ McEvelley, *Capacity*, p. 31.

⁵¹ McEvelley's take on Sontag, it should be noted, focuses solely on her essay 'Against Interpretation' rather than taking a more wide-angle view of her position, McEvelley, *Capacity*, pp. 33–36. It also pivots on his labelling of her as a formalist. However, the term formalism is in need of some much needed complication in the critical literature as it has become used as a catch-all (largely derogatory) term used to describe any methodology that engages in close reading of the aesthetics of artworks. See Sam Rose, 'Formalism and Art Writing in Interwar England' (PhD dissertation: Courtauld Institute of Art, 2013/14).

warns that Sontag overplays the particular (sensuous experience of art) to the detriment of the universal (theoretical or philosophical). The charge of elitism, frequently directed at Barthes and Sontag, becomes the inevitable consequence as Negrin challenges formalists' apparently blinkered focus on the sensuous aspects of the artwork to the exclusion of 'the cultural codes presupposed in the appreciation of art'. For Negrin, they 'unwittingly perpetuate the maintenance of art as an exclusive preserve accessible only to the anointed few' and that 'though the sensuous elements of art are irreducible to philosophical concepts, neither are they totally impenetrable to interpretation'.⁵² A series of problems arise from these critiques, however, not least the way that formalism and sensualism are collapsed, made almost indistinguishable.

Is the casting of Sontag as just a sensualist wholly justified? And can her writing be described as at once optical, disembodied and sensualist? After all she is also steadfast in her call for the audience's 'reflection' as opposed to a solely emotional involvement. The two modes, reflective art (appealing to 'feelings through the route of intelligence') and emotional art ('arousing feelings' and 'empathy') are not mutually exclusive: 'Great reflective art', Sontag reminds us, 'is not frigid'.⁵³ Her sensualist tendencies, in fact, coexist with a mutually cerebral address between viewer and artwork; they are not defined against the universal aspects of intellectualism. Great art's 'emotional power is mediated. The pull toward emotional involvement is counterbalanced by elements of the work that promote distance, disinterestedness, impartiality'.⁵⁴ As Ching and Wagner-Lawlor point out, Sontag demonstrates 'a devotion to what she called "seriousness", a quality linking the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political in an attentive person's experience of the world.'⁵⁵ That sense of seriousness, of robustness, is an expansion of the aesthetic, the embodiment or enactment of the aesthetic through and beyond the confines of the artwork.⁵⁶ It is testament to the 'associative' 'worldly' mind that

⁵² Negrin, 'Art and Philosophy: Rivals or partners?', pp. 816 and 818.

⁵³ Sontag, 'Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson', in *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 177.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 177.

⁵⁵ Ching and Wagner-Lawlor, *The Scandal of Susan Sontag*, p. 2.

⁵⁶ I see subjectivity as functioning in a similarly concertina-like unfolding through and beyond the artwork.

McEvelley accused Sontag of lacking because of her formalist approach. It reveals instead her radical take on formalism, one that might be better termed phenomenological formalism or embodied formalism.

In fact, the overtly bodily nature of Sontag's criticism appears to be a key factor in the derailment of a thorough consideration of her impact on the art-historical and philosophical stage. Her sensory leanings manifest themselves in suspiciously incoherent argument causing many to bypass the work, if not the figure, of Sontag altogether. Justifying her place in the academic canon seems to require a defence of the centrality of the body and her critical self in her writing practice. We have seen how for McEvelley it amounts to a misdirected transcendental 'extreme' formalism.⁵⁷ While Negrin considers that same materialist reading of art not in opposition to philosophical thinking but inextricably linked with it.

Fred Rush gets further into the need for Sontag's proposed 'erotics of art'. He sees these erotics neither simply in opposition, nor inextricably linked but as in themselves theoretical. For him, Sontag's conception of the 'colonization of aesthetic and critical response by what she terms "theory"' is key. He reminds us that 'critical response is always, to some degree theoretical' but it is the fundamentally sensuous nature of Sontag's 'erotics' that is noteworthy, 'After all an erotics was in the ancient world a genre of theoretical investigation, not erotic experience or even erotica.'⁵⁸ Rush does not linger on this point, but it serves as further corroboration of Ching and Wagnor-Lawlor's point that Sontag's conception of sensuality, of the erotics of art, is not only visceral or sexual but also and importantly cerebral. That is, feelings are felt but they are also dwelled on in thought and in writing, and within that loaded space of lingering feeling and robust thought, serious critical value accrues. Sohyna Sayres is at pains to point out that Sontag only used the precise phrase 'an erotics' once, and that it has been the cause of much 'misreading' of her work. Whether or not Sontag stuck with that

⁵⁷ McEvelley, *Capacity*, p. 32.

⁵⁸ Rush, 'Appreciating Susan Sontag', p. 37. The term 'erotics' was originally quite separate from the sexual connotations which today have engulfed the term. Sontag then could be seen to be resuscitating the original antique meaning of erotics whilst also ushering in modern connotations (the hedonistic and the seductive) as a way to enliven the related encounter between viewer and artwork. The marrying of the sensorial (or experiential) with the theoretical is also played out, with undoubtedly clearer direction, in the thinking of John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

particular provocative term is not really the point though. The spirit of the phrase undoubtedly underlies her general approach which is premised on, as Sayres puts it: ‘a kind of method’. ‘It means,’ Sayres continues, ‘being first inside the force of a work of art, seduced by, allowing it its power. Then, in its sway, the critic explains “that it is what it is”’.⁵⁹

Section 3.2: Making sense of Sontag

A further stumbling block occurs in what is frequently deemed to be Sontag’s inconsistency and incoherence. Rush is compelled to trace three of her key essays in an attempt to render her argument clearer and more useful. However, following his examination, he concludes that her work remains fixed in its incoherence ‘if the criterion for coherence is the removal of the tension’. Those lingering tensions are between aesthetic ‘simplicity and reflexivity’, between ‘formalism and more engaged criticism’.⁶⁰ His final remarks about Sontag’s contribution are insipid, and rather undo the valuable work he has, up to this point, drawn out. He writes: ‘her treatment of these issues is a vivid example of an agile literary mind attempting to come to grips with the marginalization of aesthetic value in modernity’. The unexpected sense of deflation conveyed by Rush’s final sentence is revealing. Up to this point, he has been at pains to illustrate the various ways in which ‘attempting to come to grips’ is not what Sontag does and in fact outright resists. Such a proposition would be far too domineering, too ‘heroic’, to borrow Rush’s own phrase. He identifies Sontag’s resistance to making:

⁵⁹ Sayres quotes this phrase as being ‘an erotics of criticism’ though in Sontag’s essay it appears as ‘an erotics of art’. I have not yet ascertained whether or not ‘erotics of criticism’ appears in other instances of Sontag’s writing or whether Sayres has just accepted that for Sontag the distinction between art and criticism is so blurred that the distinction seems inconsequential. Sohnya Sayres, *Susan Sontag: The Elegiac Modernist* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 20–21.

⁶⁰ Rush, ‘Appreciating Susan Sontag’, p. 48. Again, we see Sontag’s criticism tarnished by its formalist label, in which formalism is considered less engaged than other forms of interpretation.

The connection between understanding a thing and already understanding (other) things [which] requires tracking similarities between the two relevant domains: the understood and the to-be-understood. The idea seems to be that the past leverages the present in such a way that what is idiosyncratic about the object as the object it is – its singularity or uniqueness – is submerged in favor of its belonging to a more or less undisturbed, presumed set of concepts, dispositions, or beliefs.⁶¹

The tone of Rush's sentence is revealing of a debilitating pressure to arrive at, or at least close to, a sense of resolution. It is a tendency that instead inhibits the kinds of questions we allow ourselves to ask of our subjects.⁶²

Making sense of Sontag's writing appears to impede her assimilation in art-historical, critical and philosophical discourse too, which focuses on her assumed binaries between art and the world, form and content, aesthetic and non-aesthetic, artist and viewer. However, her immersion in the materiality and self-reflexivity of art is played out through her immersion within her own thought and writing. The two time frames: during and after; the two critical modes: experiencing and reflecting; the two modes of consciousness: being and responding to art, for Sontag, are inseparable. She seeks to retain an entanglement of interrelations and intersubjectivities that are at the heart of art viewing and criticism. In his attempts to clarify her early essays Rush discovers that she is consistent in her incoherence alone. Perhaps she realises that coherence is only ever hallucinatory, like the orderly image of four unremarkable vessels in a row, enlightened and on display, for nobody in particular. Art, criticism, history, life are not puzzles; they are never complete and any sense of resolution or truth is only ever a figment, a hallucination.

Robert Boyers picks up on the importance of Sontag's retaining 'the sense of variousness and fragmentation which is inherent in her subject.' He notes early on that 'understanding is achieved through immersion in the raw phenomena, carefully

⁶¹ Rush, 'Appreciating Susan Sontag', p. 38.

⁶² See Gavin Parkinson's attempts to 'avoid a tidy resolution' arguing that 'irresolution, acausality, and indeterminism in twentieth-century art and fiction might perform evaluative tasks previously unattainable to academic art writing', in Parkinson, 'The Delvaux Mystery', p. 299.

described, only tentatively categorized'.⁶³ It is crucial, then, that her writing should encapsulate, indeed *enact*, the complexity, multiplicity, mutability and sometimes fragility of the intellectual and experiential self. Complete disentanglement or conclusion could lead only to an oversimplification at odds with the necessarily interconnected, overlapping, difficulty that an exacting critical process demands.

Rush's distillation of the essence of Sontag's dispute with interpretation – that most elusive term and process – is a positive force for re-conceiving her contribution in more nuanced terms. His reading reveals that her primary objection in 'Against Interpretation' is less broad and polemical than at first appears. He identifies two aspects of her concern with critical accounts of art: A systematicity which he relates to criticism that tends towards 'exclusion and reduction, destroying the particularity of individual works'; and 'modes of interpretation that undercut the aesthetic nature of works' by means of reducing the meaning of artworks to 'determinative' factors.⁶⁴ Rush points out that hermeneutic interpretation, which Sontag sees as debasing through translation of the original art form, is a straw man. Though she suggests varieties of guilty hermeneutic approaches – psychoanalytic, historicist, Freudian, Marxist, Symbolic – such methodologies are forgiven in figures like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Her fight, he concludes, is not necessarily with particular methodological approaches to the arts per se but with interpretations that are 'determinative', that claim to explain away the structural aesthetic value of art.⁶⁵

Section 3.3: Sontag's Aesthetic Hunger

Sontag's conception of art and interpretation, then, pivots on its indeterminacy and interconnectedness. But what of her conception of aesthetics per se? In *Enacting the Demands of Art* (2012), Michael Kelly contests the formalist, sensualist or aestheticist characterisation of Sontag's commentary in the hands of people like Negrin and McEvelley, identifying instead an 'anti-aesthetic' slant on the basis of Sontag's claim

⁶³ Boyers, 'On Susan Sontag and the New Sensibility', p. 27.

⁶⁴ Rush, 'Appreciating Susan Sontag', p. 37.

⁶⁵ Mieke Bal coined the phrase 'the narrative of anteriority' which relates to interpreting works of art only in relation to their makers, their original social, political or historic context or their iconography. See *Louise Bourgeois's Spider*, p. 32.

that: 'To avoid interpretation, art may become parody. Or it may become abstract. Or it may become ("merely") decorative. Or it may become *non-art*'.⁶⁶ For Sontag in the 1960s art cannot be grasped by the intellect; art critics should not be on the hunt for meaning in art. And if its *raison d'être* is to remain ungraspable, then art has, according to Kelly, been rendered powerless. It is the implied impotence of the aesthetic to effect any action in the world that Kelly rebuts as unsustainable. His use to our discussion here is limited by his referring almost exclusively to Sontag's study of the representation of violence in photography. Art that depicts war, aggression and violence is clearly more likely to draw out moral and political engagement though Kelly does not fully test his argument since he does not address Sontag's writing about art that is not explicitly socially or historically engaged or engaging. But in focusing on the representation of violence Kelly is able to identify Sontag as playing a major role in the 'regeneration' of a 'recalibrated' aesthetics in art criticism, theory and history.⁶⁷ In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), he argues, she repudiates her earlier anti-aesthetic, iconoclastic claim that photography cannot confer moral-political critique, in favour of a critique that inculcates a moral-political position in the art and the viewer via the medium of the aesthetic. Now Kelly's reading of Sontag hinges on the power of photography as a duplication of and distance from reality. Like a hallucination, it is a 'semblance' that 'opens up new experiences, moral-political critique, new social commitments, and even knowledge'.⁶⁸ It is worth pausing here since we have come back round to the idea of interpretation turning, at once, on non-reality as well as promising 'new experiences' and 'even new knowledge', further corroboration, therefore, of my framing of this thesis, as I did in chapter 1, as a form of practice as research. I should underline also that these new knowledges are made available to be potentially acted upon via the materiality of the artwork, its aesthetics. It chimes with my broader premise for the potential of art writing to guide art-historical inquiry as an indeterminate and inherently associative practice.

⁶⁶ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 10 my emphasis.

⁶⁷ Kelly, *A Hunger for Aesthetics*, p. 2.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 65.

Crucial to Kelly's reading of Sontag is his bringing into play John Dewey's notion that art is apprehended through its sensuous aspects. In Kelly's précis: 'art as enactment combines the moral-political demand for the *apprehension* of our needs by others with the moral-political demand for the *recognition* and *satisfaction* of these needs by others.'⁶⁹ Art is powerful once it fulfils these criteria by means of its aesthetics. It is driven by a need, which Dewey equates to hunger: 'A painting satisfies because it meets the hunger for scenes having color and light more fully than most of the things with which we are ordinarily surrounded'.⁷⁰ When a need is not met 'it denotes at least a temporary absence of adequate adjustment with surroundings' and art that is successful must rectify that, to provide for us by recourse to aesthetics.⁷¹ But whereas Dewey conceives of the unbalance relayed by art as temporary and in need of resolution, Sontag is less concerned with shoring things up, since unbalance for her 'may not be a lie'.⁷²

A problem emerges with Kelly's reading of Sontag through the filter of Dewey, though: art is only effective, only has value, if it satiates our aesthetic hunger. This idea stems from the strong Darwinian influence of Dewey's early thought.⁷³ Dewey's deep-seated interest in evolutionary theory leads him to conceptualise human needs, knowledge and morality as imperatives for survival. According to his adoption of the cyclical character of the Darwinian evolutionary paradigm, art is deemed to be 'the culmination of nature'.⁷⁴ Therefore we might be hungry for an aesthetic effect and satiated by a particular experience of art. It is essentially systemic, and yet Rush has already shown the degree to which Sontag resists systematicity in her writing.⁷⁵ What is more, such a model for critical engagement suggests that art can provide a sense of resolution for us,

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷⁰ John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, Vol. 10, 1925–1953. Art as Experience*, Jo Ann Boydston ed. (Carbondale Ill.: Southern Illinois University press, 2008), p. 260.

⁷¹ Kelly, *A Hunger for Aesthetics*, pp. 31–32.

⁷² Sontag, 'Simone Weil', p. 50.

⁷³ Jerome A. Popp, *Evolution's First Philosopher: John Dewey and the Continuity of Nature* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007).

⁷⁴ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), p. 358.

⁷⁵ Rush, 'Appreciating Susan Sontag', pp. 38–41.

it can, and if it is good should, wholly satisfy us. It is this promise of and desire for possible closure that, like the determinant interpretations of the still life that we have thus far come across, limit interpretations rather than expand them, foreclosing experiences of art rather than allowing them to unfurl. To put it another way, they conceive of art viewers as operating within the physical and conceptual boundaries of their bodies and minds with fixed capacities, like Zurbarán's vessels waiting to be filled. The danger, however, is that if our aesthetic hunger is fully satisfied by a piece of art, we will no longer need or even want it any more. So what next?

Section 4: When Sontag meets *Four Vessels*

The practical implication of Sontag's ideas can only come to the fore if we include her directly in an imagined conversation about *Four Vessels*, which hypothetical encounter also bears on the larger questions about subjectivity that this thesis addresses. This will involve looking at Sontag both within and beyond her extant oeuvre by weaving together elements of her commentary on film, photography, dance and painting, and a speculative commentary on Zurbarán's painting. But what is the impact of thinking about Zurbarán's still life at a remove from the painting and its historical context, filtered through Sontag's writing? Will we arrive, paradoxically, at a closer understanding of the material mechanics and the emotional effect of the painting? Or will the distance realised by the secondary mediatory figure lead to misrepresentation? Could such an event ever be construed as desirable, or at least not disastrous?

There are a series of themes to which Sontag returns in her criticism including surrealism, photography, spiritualism, the form of the artwork and its address to the viewer, and the presence or absence of a psychological narrative. My discussion of these themes draws out repeated points of contact with three elements that this chapter has held in the balance: *Four Vessels*, Susan Sontag's writing, and the roles of interpretation, association and subjectivity.

Section 4.1: 'The truth is balance, but the opposite of truth, which is unbalance, may not be a lie'

Surrealism and photography are closely entwined in Sontag's theories of art and interpretation. And Zurbarán's still life has been described, here and elsewhere, as banal and ethereal, simple and beguiling, natural and choreographed, real and unreal. Such antithetical descriptors underlie my sense of its surrealist unfolding. But Sontag's commentary on photography is propelled by a tension between the dualities of the camera as objective recorder of data and as the subjective record of a viewpoint, thereby, probing the relation between fiction and the documentary, truth and imagination, reality and appearance.

Unlike Surrealist painting, of which she is scathing, photography, above all other genres, could seize the substance at the heart of the surrealist mission most fully, partly because it is 'natively surreal'. 'Surrealism', Sontag says, 'lies at the very heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision'.⁷⁶ Though Zurbarán's duplicate conforms to this sense of heightened intellectual and psychological drama, it is certainly not 'a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask', as Sontag defines the photograph, it contains within it the index of reality. Painting, on the other hand, is 'an interpretation of the real'.⁷⁷ By aligning photography with reality, she positions it as a carrier of truth, while painting, as an interpretation, is a step away from truth, a fiction or distortion. Need this mediated character be construed negatively as Sontag does when comparing the indexicality of photography with the symbolic nature of painting? The question brings us back to subjective art histories and to criticism which might risk distancing itself from, or wilfully obscuring the truth or reality of an artwork and its original context. However, as Sontag in another context tells us: 'An idea which is a distortion may have a greater intellectual thrust than the truth; it may serve the needs of the spirit, which

⁷⁶ For Sontag surrealist paintings are 'sleekly calculated, complacently well made, undialectical', *On Photography*, pp. 51–52. Kelly makes interesting use of Sontag's discussion of the dialectics at the heart of photography and Theodor Adorno's notion of semblance, Kelly, *A Hunger for Aesthetics*, pp. 59–65.

⁷⁷ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 156.

vary. The truth is balance, but the opposite of truth, which is unbalance, may not be a lie.’⁷⁸

Zurbarán’s inconsistent representation of shadows offers an interesting point of convergence given how closely enmeshed shadows are with the history of surrealism and photography. As I explored in the first section of this chapter, shadows are not where they should be in this painting. Shadow should be cast, for example, where the central white vase interrupts the light rays as they strike the neighbouring orange vase. But it is not. Shadows are thrown below and between the pots not on or behind them. They at once link the pots, like shadow-bunting, and separate them so that the glow of each vessel is alienated and disconnected. Like subtle connections these shadows guide the eye but stop, abruptly, just short of the outline of the next pot; they create at once unity and detachment, flow and staccato, depth and flatness, substance and suggestion. The balance of the near-symmetrical composition is also breached by the interjection of a small section of shadow at the left hand, rear corner of the wooden shelf, next to the goblet. What object draws this shadow is unclear but together with the strong cast light, it is evidence of a referent outside of the image, perhaps nodding towards the row of vessels continuing beyond the frame. It also unfixes the viewer from what might initially appear to be a centred unitary position. The painting, then, is not entirely static nor hermetically sealed – which for Sontag represented a major drawback of the medium – but suggests the existence of a world beyond itself. Similarly the surreality of a photograph is premised on our knowledge that it represents a momentary fragment of a world, on its incompleteness and interjection into and suspension of sequential time.

The simultaneous attachment and detachment made available through *Four Vessels* brings me back to two analogies I made earlier. One of my ‘stray associations’ was between Zurbarán’s painting and the self-proclaimed ‘metaphysical’ paintings by de Chirico. The metaphysical aspects of de Chirico’s work also loops back to the surrealist compulsion to juxtapose through light and shadow, through texture, colour and trans-

⁷⁸ Sontag, ‘Simone Weil’, p. 50.

temporal, trans-cultural, trans-geographical objects.⁷⁹ In *The Uncertainty of the Poet* (Tate, London, 1913), for example, a high-brow classical Greek sculpture meets a bunch of (non-European) bright yellow bananas before a post-industrial steam train racing away in the background. Further manifestations of the surreal occur, as discussed, through the estranging omission of shadows and when, in introducing Sontag into the discussion, I noted that the still life had a photographic quality that I hypothesised might have appealed to the critic.

But the theme of surreality is also raised, from a different angle, by Robert Havard in relation to Zurbarán, whose work he contextualises within the Spanish Golden Age of art and literature. For Havard the surreal reality of Zurbarán's work most encapsulates what he considers its essential Spanishness where 'naturalism and mysticism hold joint sovereignty, lucidity generating an exact representation of the humblest objects, otherworldliness ('fuga': flight) rendering them sublime and forlorn'.⁸⁰ The word 'forlorn' is key here because it links also to the 'irrefutable pathos' which according to Sontag is a central characteristic of surrealist photography. For Sontag, on mid-nineteenth century photography, that melancholy ('Melancholy Objects' is the name of her chapter on surrealism) hails through its 'message from time past'; for Havard it is wholly 'rooted in the aestheticism of counter-reformation Spain'. He goes beyond Brown's claim that Zurbarán 'heightens and then transforms the real into the super-real, thus expressing the dual nature of Christ'.⁸¹ In Havard's estimation 'the cultivation of this dualism [between the real and the super-real] as an artistic praxis owed much to the Jesuits, those influential patrons of art whose founder, St Ignatius Loyola, insisted in his spiritual exercise on the contemplation of real things - the nails, wood, thorns, spear and vinegar of Christ's passion, for example - as a springboard to the divine'.⁸² Havard's recourse to the theme of surreality is identified as historically founded.

⁷⁹ Of Zurbarán's still lifes Gállego has also pointed out that, 'Their isolation, their lack of atmosphere and the most obsessive swelling of their convex curves give them a wholly modern appeal, the appeal of surrealist, magic-realist, and Hyper-realist objects divorces from their context in a deliberate abnormality, which is, as we know one of the ways Surrealists attempt to surprise a new reality', *Francisco de Zurbarán*, p. 50.

⁸⁰ Havard, *The Spanish Eye*, p xiii.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p xiii.

⁸² Havard, *The Spanish Eye*, p. xiii referencing Saint Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, Joseph A. Munitiz and Phillip Endean trans. (London and New York: Penguin, 1996).

I should point out that my references to the surreal are brought out through the materiality of the still life, rather than its history. Neither Havard's nor Brown's reading act as confirmation of the paintings' surreality but they corroborate my initial sense that it might be read as such. This repeated eliciting of *Four Vessels*' surreality is a key demonstration of intersubjective triangulation at work.⁸³ John Dewey's notion of the idiomatic use of the term 'relation' serves to further establish the purpose and impact of Havard's observations to this thesis. I might say that Havard is 'related' to my project; his presence, 'fixes attention upon the way things bear upon one another, their clashes and unitings, the way they fulfil and frustrate, promote and retard, excite and inhibit one another'.⁸⁴ The surreal overtones of the painting, that Havard stresses, appear to me, however, limiting, inhibiting. It actually halts the painting's surreality by fixing it so definitely, so seemingly pragmatically, to a specific and identifiable external reference.

Section 4.2: 'Expounded'

What else might Sontag make of *Four Vessels*' straightforward structure: six pots displayed in a row? Her commentary on the twelve defined episodes of *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) might come in useful. To borrow Sontag's phrase, Zurbarán has not shown why these pots are placed together in this austere formation 'he has, rather, expounded on it'. Unlike comparable still lifes taken from this period he does not shroud the message – (or more Sontagian) the content – of his painting in universally recognisable symbolism (a skull, an egg timer, etc.) or the search for a fitting narrative (as say a Vermeer painting has shown inexhaustibly to elicit). Rather one senses a visual and painterly probing of structure, contours, textures, colours, volumes and recesses. Serraller, of course, insists that in fact these pots do symbolise, they symbolise at once their local manufacturing industry and local saints. It is easy to confer on Serraller's reading the authority to end the conversation about *Four Vessels* as if the art historian has managed to see through or beyond the facade of the painting, to clarify it, to break it down, as in: $a = b + c$ or *Four Vessels* = local manufacturing + catholic saints. Yet such a reading,

⁸³ See Donald Davidson on 'triangulation' discussed in chapter 1 under 'On the Implication of Matthew Rampley's critique'.

⁸⁴ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Pedigree, 2005), p. 139.

what Sontag would term ‘translation’, also forecloses the discussion.⁸⁵ Rush would argue with me on this point: ‘After all, translation is a subtle art that had better include amongst its core admissions that translation is not a univocal enterprise – i.e., one translation does not foreclose others and deciding which is best, at least within a scope of the better ones, may be impossible.’⁸⁶ And I would agree, translation is certainly a much more open and creative process than Sontag’s characterisation would have it. But formulaic conclusions such as Serraller’s are mutually exclusive, that is, they render all other (non-historically contextualised) readings, by implication, further from the ‘truth’. They leave us with a feeling that they have provided all the answers we need to understand this image; ‘Look no further!’ they imply; the pictorial code is cracked. But as Sontag shows, readings that emerge through the assimilation of artworks via experience, thought, and writing provide unforeseen intellectual fodder.

Section 4.3: ‘Soul’

The drama that *Four Vessels* enacts is heightened by its internalised alienation and inactivity in a way analogous to Sontag’s description of *Vivre Sa Vie* as a probing of freedom and psychological interiority. ‘The soul’, she says, ‘is something to be found not upon but after stripping away the “inside”’.⁸⁷ *Four Vessels* shows minimal life: light, inanimate objects and the mere hint of a water line. In contrast, Zurbarán’s other still lifes always contain something solid, something graspable: a wicker basket piled high with oranges or bread, a pewter plate holding plump citrons or quinces, a rose resting on a plate, a vase bursting with an arrangement of flowers. In *Four Vessels* any superfluous matter has been stripped away baring the figure of each vessel in its raw form, destined to contain only air, water or another vessel. Under the spotlight of Zurbarán’s Caravaggesque light essentials are exposed. The materials themselves are brought into question: light and dark; substance and shadow; solids, liquids and gases. The objects are presented in line, at the forefront of the image rendered with visible clarity but conceptual equivocality. They appear, through proximity and definition,

⁸⁵ Rush, ‘Appreciating Susan Sontag’, pp. 39–40.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 39.

⁸⁷ Sontag, ‘Godard’s *Vivre Sa Vie*’, p. 205.

physically graspable and by their simple alignment, intellectually graspable.⁸⁸ It is a simple, stripped-down choreography of simple, stripped-down objects. Sontag would call this effect Bressonian, when, ‘what satisfies is that the form is perfectly appropriate to the theme’.⁸⁹ It creates a feeling of rational ‘balance’, and therefore ‘truth’. But much of *Four Vessels*’ affect is also achieved, in the manner by which Sontag describes Brecht’s work, ‘when the material and the form are at cross purposes [...] placing a hot subject in a cold frame’.⁹⁰ In other words when the material and the form are unstable or unbalanced.

The ‘unbalance’ – which, remember ‘may not be a lie’ – in *Four Vessels* is crucial, reeling us in and manifesting in a number of ways.⁹¹ Zurbarán heightens our experience of the humble elements by contrasting their modesty with dramatic lighting. His precise alignment of objects is awkward and unnatural, pointing to a systemising thought process, objects on display or under study. The character and angle of Zurbarán’s light contributes to the sense of his expounding on and challenging of these pots. They are in the spotlight, examined, tested, probed. Yet the warm yellow of the light as it strikes each object draw out a softer edge, as do the gentle curvatures of the objects and the pots’ warm mid-range colour tones. Each object taken in isolation is reserved but intrinsically easy and inviting. In combination, though, their presentation to the world outside the painting is stilted and off-balance. The idea they present is a subtle ‘distortion’ whose effect challenges rather than soothes.

Section 4.4: ‘How it is what it is, even that it is what it is’

To double back to *Vivre Sa Vie*, Sontag concludes that it is an illustration of a ‘radical spiritual doctrine’ which transposes ‘the values of sanctity and martyrdom [...] to a totally secular plane’ and which presents us with ‘something akin to the mood and intensity of Bressonian spirituality but without Catholicism’.⁹² So what are we to make

⁸⁸ Although, as Norman Bryson showed, the objects’ graspability and our invitation into the scene is illusory see Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, p. 74.

⁸⁹ Sontag, ‘Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson’, p. 180.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 180.

⁹¹ Sontag, ‘Simone Weil’, p. 50.

⁹² Sontag, ‘Godard’s *Vivre Sa Vie*’, p. 206.

of Zurbarán's 'spiritual doctrine'? We could compare it to Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627) who has been described as one of Zurbarán's greatest influences. Both artists sometimes depict choreographed alignments of objects, mannerist lighting, simplicity of focus on the objects on a shallow plane with black background lending an overall effect of concentrated gravitas. Cotán, however, concentrates almost entirely on depicting food whereas Zurbarán finds intrigue in containers. We might identify a sense of comparative earthliness and naturalism in Zurbarán which runs counter to Cotán's almost hyper-realist and dramatic concept and execution. The painterly style of each also reveals both affinities and differences. Cotán's execution tends to be stylised, polished with stark definition and luminous colour and texture while Zurbarán has two distinctive painterly modes. In *Still Life with Lemons* his touch is crisp, smooth, his colour luminous, his forms tight and strongly reminiscent of Cotán; it lends a supra human air to the scene. *Four Vessels*, on the other hand, reveals a more relaxed execution, its brushwork is visible and looser, less ostentatious, more fallibly human. The line and volume of the pots is less refined, revealing imperfections, where the pots seem less strongly rooted on the shelf than the vessels that appear in his more honed paintings. Its colour palette is pared down, assertive but not flamboyant. But after all, we are looking here at six pots whose *raison d'être* is humble utility over sophisticated technical and aesthetic form. Sontag might be driven to praise the way in which Zurbarán's form, his means of expression (through brushwork, colour and structural simplicity) and content all converge. Form and content become less easily detached when writing about artwork: 'The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.'⁹³

If we take Sontag's point on the distinction between form and content being illusory, where does that claim stand in relation to Zurbarán's pots? Sontag would argue that *how* he paints and presents these containers is far more interesting than either *what* these pots might be (whether they are locally made Seville pots or mere studies for principle works etc.) or what they might symbolise (purity, the specific economic conditions of seventeenth-century Spain, the simple nobility of true souls, Seville, St Regina and St Justa etc.). And to return to Sontag's attempts to establish the spiritual character that lies

⁹³ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 14.

through Godard's film, this still life's spirituality might then be described as revealing abstemious, devout Counter Reformation fervour. But then what? As a twenty-first century atheist viewer what more is there to add? Such a reading still excludes, or at least usurps, any other critical voice by its authoritative currency.

Section 4.5: Learning 'to see more, to hear more, to feel more'

In section 2, we saw Abbot note that each pot remains isolated in *Four Vessels*, only the plates physically touching other vessels.⁹⁴ Due to the separation enforced by the idiosyncratic cast-shadows there is a sense in which each pot exists only in relation to the light source. They all look to the light for their sustenance: to grant them distinct identities through colour, volume, depth. There is an intensity to this blinkered relationship; the pots ignore their neighbours except when an interaction is forced by the weight of a goblet or vase on top of a plate. The viewer is held back from this communication; the vessels are all shifted at angles away from us. As Sontag would put it, our 'reflection' is invited, our 'emotional participation [...] postponed'.⁹⁵ The exclusivity of this directed line of communication is reminiscent of Zurbarán's *Saint Francis in Meditation* (The National Gallery, London, 1635-39): still, solid and sombre, Saint Francis is illuminated by the same warm angled light, with eyes directed not towards us but up, to a world beyond our own.

So Gállego was right to observe that the objects in Zurbarán's still lifes 'so carefully and austere depicted, have the presence of living characters', and that they reveal that 'being a fruit, a cup, a napkin, a plate or an earthen pot is something almost as essential as being a man.'⁹⁶ The pots are monks then? No, as Nana in *Vivre Sa Vie* put it: 'A plate is a plate. A man is a man. Life is...life'.⁹⁷ A monk is a monk. A pot is a pot. The reflective attitude that Zurbarán's painting elicits should not bring about a substitution of forms with meaning; the pots are still pots even when they are arranged and painted

⁹⁴ Abbot, 'All that is Solid Melts into Air', p. 5.

⁹⁵ Sontag, 'Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson', p. 177.

⁹⁶ Gállego, *Francisco de Zurbarán*, p. 50.

⁹⁷ Nana, in *Vivre Sa Vie*, dir. Jean-Luc Godard, (Panthéon Distribution, 1962) [DVD].

in such a way as might recall other things simultaneously. Sontag's interest lies in how precisely a film or artwork induces contemplation, how 'emotional power is mediated' by the artwork, where emotional or sensual involvement is neither blinding nor limiting nor so relative as to become inconsequential. She is also at pains to ascertain the peculiar character of the type of contemplation elicited.⁹⁸ Rather than interpret, which she says 'excavates, destroys; it digs "behind" the text, to find a sub-text,' she intends to 'recover our senses. We must', she declares, 'learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more', all of which pivots on conveying the form and structure of the film or artwork.⁹⁹

One senses a similar appeal in *Four Vessels*. Its modest simplicity, its terseness of means, its mediatory colours and rhythms, its soothing brushwork and forthright strength all build up a feeling of something substantial, something of universal significance. They are just pots, but give them time and focus. The very structure of the work, its form and materiality, invites us, compels us, 'to see more, to hear more, to feel more' through its holding back and lack of didactic or narrative content.¹⁰⁰ Does Zurbarán's painting enact a model of viewership that Sontag too enacts through her criticism? His rendering of the still life may not lead to the apprehension of a political idea, but rather urges us towards a way of viewing that might enlarge our capacity to be receptive. If we understand being receptive as a state that does not only passively absorb but also assimilates and re-transmits, then it becomes a faculty that is in itself valuable and sustaining, a yearning with moral implications.¹⁰¹

But how does an artwork transmit and how do we receive its core idea(s) in the absence of narrative action? Sontag bestows high praise on Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie* for its ability to make available, via its structure, the overarching idea with which it is concerned. For

⁹⁸ Interestingly Sontag tells us in 'Against Interpretation' when writing in paradigmatic terms: 'What we decidedly do not need now is further to assimilate Art into Thought, or (worse yet) Art into Culture', Sontag, 'Against Interpretation' (2001), p. 13. Before a specific artwork she is sensitive to the peculiar address of that piece so that: '*Vivre Sa Vie* invites a rather theoretical treatment, because it is—intellectually—extremely complex', see Sontag, 'Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*' (2001), p. 196. In the instance of Zurbarán's still life, both the intellectual and sensuous impulses come to the fore.

⁹⁹ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 6.

¹⁰⁰ Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', p. 14.

¹⁰¹ Tom McCarthy, *Transmission and the Individual Remix: How Literature Works* (London: Vintage Digital, 2012), Ebook.

her the film ‘is an exhibit, a demonstration. It shows that something happened, not why it happened’.¹⁰² She calls this approach proving and contrasts it to analyzing. The latter method would draw out the psychological drama playing out in the minds of the protagonists due to the unfolding events, it would be concerned with how a character might feel after a certain event and why. Sontag uses the character of Nana as her example. Nana turns to prostitution when her attempts to become an actress falter but Godard never portrays her character by revealing ‘her motives except at a distance, by inference’.¹⁰³ The forces of overt emotional and mental states, often deployed in film to guide the viewer and make sense of narrative (‘analyzing’), are cast off by Godard in favour of a less didactic setting forth of events on screen. This detached and uncompromising presentation of events or objects (as visual events) works analogously to Zurbarán’s painting. He exhibits his subject matter, sets it out in an almost symmetrical configuration but then steps back from the objects to allow the viewer space and time to reflect and make connections. He offers a distillation of forms, detached from any naturalising, useful or directed domestic context. The result is a psychological drama with non-dramatic narrative consequences. This lack of direction demonstrates an unwillingness to show us how to look, what to look for or even why to look; it activates the viewer sensually, intellectually and perhaps, for Sontag or a seventeenth-century viewer, spiritually.

Section 5: In Focus: Sontag’s Art Writing

My ventriloquising of Sontag’s hypothetical response to *Four Vessels* has no standing, however, if I look only at what she says. How she writes is also what she writes and both what and how need to be considered in tandem. Let us not fall for the ‘illusion’ that form and content are separate.¹⁰⁴ Sontag herself is intrigued by the form and mechanics of critical writing as a performance of ideas and of self. She is interested in its rhetoric, its voice, its ambiguous and unstable relation to both author and object. Her essay on Barthes in *Where the Stress Falls* (2001), is particularly insightful. She admires the

¹⁰² Sontag, ‘Godard’s Vivre Sa Vie’, p. 199.

¹⁰³ Sontag, ‘Godard’s Vivre Sa Vie’, p. 205.

¹⁰⁴ Sontag, ‘Against Interpretation’, p. 11. Sontag scholars are mesmerised by her idiosyncratic, demanding and restless writing style, see Sayres, ‘Susan Sontag and the Practice of Modernism’ which explicitly evidences its Sontagian influence. And also Nelson, ‘Soliciting Self-Knowledge’.

ways in which he merges the boundaries between writing criticism, philosophy and fiction. She writes:

Barthes offers classifications to keep matters open – to reserve a place for the uncoded, the enchanted, the intractable, the histrionic [he] is drawn to hyperbole [and] enlists ideas in a drama, often a sensual melodrama or a faintly Gothic one. He speaks of the quiver, thrill, or shudder of meaning, of meanings that themselves vibrate, separate, that exert pressure, crack, rupture, are pulverized.¹⁰⁵

Similarly, Sontag contrasts Cocteau's work, which she says is premised on a 'total sensuous whole', with Godard's. For her the beauty of Godard's work depends on his use of 'techniques that would fragment, dissociate, alienate, break up. Example: the famous staccato editing (jump cuts et al.)'.¹⁰⁶ Here, she moves from whole sentences to a staccato technique of her own, making the reader feel its effect, see it (in words and shapes on the page), hear it and imagine it in film (in our minds). It is effective, not just as rhetorical underpinning but as a merging of criticism with art.

Sontag's experimental and playful tendencies exist in the larger structure of her writing too, which is often highly receptive to both the form and content to which it responds. As Rush showed us in Section 3 of this chapter, she avoids resolutions, preserving instead the sense of a work-in-process, even at the expense of coherence. In some essays, for example, the traditional narrative arc of a critical essay – introduction, middle and end – dissolves. 'Notes on Camp' (1964) is made up of 58 'tentative and nimble' 'jottings' capturing the 'fugitive sensibility' of camp.¹⁰⁷ In 'A lexicon for *Available Light*' (1983) words and ideas are introduced and arranged A-Z, with explanations of varying lengths (between a single sentence to a page). In contrast, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' (1967) is dense and highly wrought. It is verbose and sometimes impenetrable apparently running counter to its subject matter which deals in reduction and nothingness, though it is also a recognition of the intimidating fullness of silence. Though split into twenty sections, the essay sees Sontag ensconcing herself in a word-

¹⁰⁵ Sontag, 'Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes', in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, Elizabeth Hardwick intro. (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 68.

¹⁰⁶ Sontag, 'Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*', p. 200.

¹⁰⁷ Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', *Against Interpretation* (2001), p. 276.

heavy world of labyrinthine conceptual complexity and cross-disciplinary historical referencing. One senses her ambivalence as to whether her readers can keep up. According to Cary Nelson, the essay ‘produce[s] a kind of fractured collage, a series of related passes at an impossible subject’.¹⁰⁸ Her outlook appears bleak. Foretelling that neither she nor her reader will reach any real enlightenment, whether objective or mimetic, she favours instead a rigorous obscurity built up of a series of twenty attacks upon, and then retreats from, her subject at different angles. The essay comes to reveal itself as a cubist collage comprising elements of generally recognisable motifs, references and ideas configured in such a way as to make its audience sweat. It is another example of Sontag’s low regard for writing as a medium which communicates lucid thought, lucid thought being in her view a debasement and oversimplification of thought. It is as if less ordered content and structure, sometimes described as her incoherence, is in fact integral to her meaning. While her writing is sometimes accused of being contrived, it actually attempts to retain the reality of the critical process as something spontaneous, present and interconnected, and which also has to navigate the restlessness of the internal rhetorical voice. Her writing thus has an unfixed integrity more attuned to the practice and experience of art. It does not draw to a close after the experience is over but is in a state of constant becoming. It functions as a phenomenological enactment of the physical and intellectual encounter with art and ideas.

The convergence of art writing with art recalls a sentence I wrote in section 1 of this chapter where I found myself think-walking towards, in and around the still life. Long before I had any idea that Sontag might play a part in this chapter, I wrote: ‘Here. Are. Some. Pots.’¹⁰⁹ The phrasing was spontaneous but one which I later mulled over and came close to deleting for fear that it sounded too self-conscious. Yet, as I re-read it the staccato rhythm of the phrasing felt right. It was something about the brevity of these four words and their sheer ordinariness. Even their visual appearance on the page, separated by four dark circles, like adjacent cast shadows, felt fitting. Was their power for me located simply in the echoing of the rhythm, form and presentation of the pots

¹⁰⁸ Nelson, ‘Soliciting Self-Knowledge’, pp. 723–724.

¹⁰⁹ See Section 1 above, p. 64.

themselves? The pots are separated by dark recesses, space and shadows; the words hang on the page, detached from each other against a white background, and further severed by the finality of four full stops. The painting does not suggest the usual characteristics of a kitchen shelf which should surely be a cobbling together of frequently used, washed, moved and replaced receptacles. Similarly my phrase is not merely a vehicle for art-historical information. It was an awkward phrase to physically type as well as read. Its jarring staccato disrupts, and runs counter, to the oft-desirable sentence flow.

It recalls Sontag at the end of 'Where the Stress Falls' (2001):

Nothing new except language, the ever found. Cauterizing the torment of personal relations with hot lexical choices, jumpy punctuation, mercurial sentence rhythms. Devising more subtle, more engorged ways of knowing, of sympathizing, of keeping at bay. It's a matter of adjectives. It's where the stress falls.¹¹⁰

This was written in response to a passage in Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights* (1979) in which the narrator reflects, as Hardwick puts it, on 'The torment of personal relations. Nothing new there except in the disguise, and in the escape on the wings of adjectives. Sweet to be pierced by daggers at the end of paragraphs'.¹¹¹ Sontag's mirroring of phrases and sentence structures rings out as a courtship with the text, not a momentary encounter but the long drawn out process of being with a text. Her description and enactment of the process of writing and responding is at once sensual and intellectual. It is visceral, with sexual overtones ('cauterizing' and 'engorged ways of knowing'). But it is also matter-of-fact and detached ('devising', 'keeping at bay', 'It's a matter of adjectives'). The two modes, the sensorial and the intellectual, are neither conceived nor should be received as separate.

The process of critical writing becomes an investigation into 'devising more subtle, more engorged ways of knowing' and feeling one's way around an encounter. This sounds remarkably close to Elkins's description of the function of practice-led PhDs,

¹¹⁰ Sontag, 'Where the Stress Falls', in *Where the Stress Falls* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), p. 29.

¹¹¹ Sontag quoting Hardwick in 'Where the Stress Falls', p. 28.

discussed in chapter 1: ‘theorizing about research and the production of new knowledge’.¹¹² For Sontag, her coining of ‘more subtle’ modes of knowledge-making often result in what Didi-Huberman would call ‘not-knowledge’.¹¹³ They are swollen by the emotional and intellectual subjectivity of their author; they are modes of knowledge that accrue through responses both to artworks and to one’s own writing about artworks. They are therefore distortions, but distortions, Sontag tells us, ‘may have a greater intellectual thrust than the truth’.¹¹⁴ They are an expansion, an important complication of a truth, caught in a state of unstable immanence.

Subtle distortion leads to silent estrangement in both Zurbarán and Sontag’s work. Sontag sways between absorption and rejection of her subject matter, between a staging of and resistance to her writing and thinking self. Recall her reverie, ambiguously tinged with melancholy, that the new myth of art longs for ‘the cloud of unknowingness beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech [tending towards an] elimination of ‘the subject’ (the ‘object’, the ‘image’) [...] and the pursuit of silence’.¹¹⁵ Then behold once again Zurbarán’s row of ordinary vessels, mounted as physically, emotionally and intellectually at once close and distant, graspable but ineffable. Despite his naturalistic handling of the still life it is, as section 3 discusses, closer to a photographic hallucination than a mimetic representation. The pots say and do nothing; attempts to animate them directly through symbolic, connoisseurial, marxist or historicist reasoning turned out to be fallible.

But what has become of interpretation in all this? Conceived as a meditation, the chapter bears witness to a probing of the ineffable aspects of experiencing, responding to, writing and thinking on, towards and around art and words. Rather than master the image by interpretation, it has instead sought, as Tom McCarthy would put it, ‘to help

¹¹² Elkins, *Artists with PhDs* <https://www.academia.edu/168372Artists_with_PhDs_On_the_New_Doctoral_Degree_in_Studio_Art_opening> [accessed 22 November 2013], p. ix. Elkins in fact considers this ‘nonsense’. On the value or otherwise of the model of practice-led PhDs see chapter 1.

¹¹³ Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, p. 34.

¹¹⁴ Sontag, ‘Simone Weil’, p. 50.

¹¹⁵ Sontag, ‘The Aesthetics of Silence’, in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, Elizabeth Hardwick intro. (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 182.

attune' one's senses to the painting and the hypothetical encounter between the painting and Sontag. It puts subjectivity and association into art-historical practice as a method which takes seriously the facts of feeling in the process of enquiry. It contends that attuning ourselves to how we think and write art-historically, while thinking and writing art-historically, matters. Like McCarthy, it reveals no 'hidden and decisive message' and seeks no conclusion.¹¹⁶ Instead it broaches a series of questions continued in the following chapters also. What happens when we characterise interpretation – encompassing viewing, writing and thinking – as both a practice and performance? What happens when we sense resonances between artworks across historical boundaries? Or between media – between a text and a body of paintings – that on paper appear remote, but that through a sustained encounter appear to converge, as chapter 2 now explores.

¹¹⁶ McCarthy, *Transmission and the Individual Remix*, E book.

Chapter 3

Time and Confluence:

Passing between Peter Doig and Walter Pater

Water is the element of connection.¹

Tania Kovats

¹ Tania Kovats, *Drawing Water: Drawing as a Mechanism for Exploration* (Edinburgh: The Fruitmarket Gallery, 2014), p. 12.

A red boat, put one way

A red boat, the pulsing heart of Peter Doig's *Figures in Red Boat* (Private Collection, New York, 2005–7) (fig. 6) is compressed and elongated, like two cupped hands conjoining to form a floating container, a mind's eye, an eye's mind. Its rim, engorged, is drenched in scarlet that speeds, headlong blood-line, to the vessel's surface. On reaching full capacity its redness is disgorged, spilled from the bucket that has reached its limit, and merged with the liquid wash that keeps the vessel afloat. Buoyed, its surface skin erupts in rows of molten streaks and spray.²

The hessian hue of the work's base layer is, however, never far away. It pushes through the layers of subsequent paint intermittently, dissolving the clarity and vividness of colour, knocking it back. Various shades of midnight, sky, and air-force blues, of mauve and heather merge. The modulation between each shade, or their application on the canvas, bears little correspondence to the subject of the painting, whether land or water. At times expanses that we read to be water are rubbed, dryly, more akin to a desiccated weathered wall. At others they are a wash of drips. The lower third, below the boat, lets rip a motley of seeping waves in salmon, setting plaster, rose pink, lava red, sky and cerulean blue which appear to run down the canvas. Paint is caught between flow and stasis, then, like the boat itself, which is a vessel intended for movement but which, here, lies adrift. It is a reminder that this is just a painting made from viscous and semi-viscous liquid on a semi-absorbent solid.

As my eye is caught for a moment, itself adrift, the imaginary intermittent lick of calm water against the boat's bruised underside comes to the fore, faintly sucking and slapping a-rhythmically against its slender bilge, offering an imaginary soundtrack to the inconclusive scene. The lapping melds into the sound of a loaded paint brush as it is unburdened against the linen canvas stretched taut, resounding as each daub slops and thrums as the wet kiss of paint couples and uncouples with the weave's rough skin.

² My deliberate inclusion of mixed metaphors demonstrates the emergence of thinking and the non-methodological, non-systematic attempts to capture thought in the act.

Surfacing. An archipelago of faceless, gestureless, speechless white-shirted, figures without mouths and only dents for eyes release a silent scream. Each figure is pictured as if contained within an invisible blot, circumnavigated by a chasm of colour and shape that separates the you from the me and the him from the him (they are *hes* aren't they?). Communication between these islands is arrested, or at least complicated, by their introversion, by their indeterminate masks. These are like words unhitched from syntactical or narrative expectations, whose straying floats purposelessly in the midst of a subject, of a space, of a painting, say:

as if
like
like this
like these then
and them

Like these (non-) sentences, Doig's figures resemble words unfinished, that are wanting in crucial elements – eyes or mouth, letters, punctuation or action – and without which their arrangement appears to have gone astray.

In the absence of a more explicit narrative, the soundtrack of the application of paint reemerges. This time, rather than the viscosity of the central red slit, its sound is ethereal. It is equivalent to the uncertainty of a wash, a sigh, uneven in spread, the way that breath condenses against a cold window, on the brink of a gas, now liquid, but only just. It is followed by a sluicing, pictured in the wave-like formations that slide down the painting's uppermost edge. But rather than adding to the image, this gushing from on high lays bare the canvas, risking its effacement, mirroring the figures' own defacement. It is a tease, Doig doing by undoing, undoing by doing, Doig; the action of attempted or potential erasure embodies the volatility of the image, this image, any image.

Text like this finds itself adrift in a space that spreads across a sheet of paper, untied from a temporally grounding context, without the familiarity of a beginning, middle and

end or a fore, middle and background. Much in the way that Doig's scene is tilted, stretched length ways, the roseate reflection of the boat and its figures, elongated; it causes all sense of depth to spill over and out and down. Unlike Zurbarán's vessels which are set upon a definite stage (a table or shelf) Doig's vessel is set upon an expanse of water (a lake, sea or lagoon). The boat melts as if liquefying under the force of its appearance on a surface, in paint. In the way that as a warm gas, like an idea or memory, hits a cold surface, or the weave of a canvas or the dried pulp of a page, it condenses momentarily and then runs.

Doig's lace-like shoreline, outlined roughly in white, fails to firm things up. Conventional foreground detail is all but absent. In its place is a wash, unbalanced by the more detailed delineation of fractured palms that peep out from the blue-grey curtain: a coquettish leg here, a flaccid arm there, a slender trunk just discernible. Or a quasi description of a red boat here, an imaginative expansion of it there, an analogy between it and some other vessel there.

Like this... Like these

Already a certain type of language, and – to return to Michael Oakeshott, who appeared in my chapter 1 – 'poetic imagining' has emerged from this acquaintance with *Figures in Red Boat* (fig. 6).³ Not only have these words addressed its look and sound, the painting has also come to elicit 'a tactile mode of description', as Shiff had it of Cézanne.⁴ These words have tried to render the image, and the effect of the image, in themselves. They amount to a *sensorium of thought* on and around and through and about the painting.

Passing about the painting

As it turns out, the language that felt most adequate in conveying the painting is characterised by actively metamorphic words like *bleeding*, *condensing* and *melting*,

³ See section on 'Conversation' and 'Poetic Imagining' in chapter 1 of this thesis.

⁴ Richard Shiff, 'Cézanne's Physicality: The Politics of Touch', in *The Language of Art History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 167.

words that carry with them a sense of moving between two states.⁵ Blood runs and then coagulates as it comes into contact with air; condensation is the conversion from a gas to a liquid on a solid surface; melting is the process by which a solid turns into a liquid sometimes, only to re-solidify. Other words for this might be *passage* or *transition*.

My acquaintance with this particular painting using these (among other) particular terms reveals two important qualities about research undertaken in this way. Firstly, these terms have suggested themselves to me over a long period of contact with the painting. That proximity, in turn, has elicited a confluence with the painting, between words I have thought most suitable to relate the form of the painting as well as the specific nature of the form of the painting *as I see it* now. The difference is subtle, but in the second, the process of perception becomes paramount, a process which is all importantly ongoing: much like Doig's painting with its blank faces, bare canvas and roughly sketched shoreline, it appears as it is, either unfinished or barely begun. Put like this, the painting, as well as, I hope, my text conveys most fully a sense of the presentness of viewing, capturing the essence of the felt experience where two previously separate bodies make contact, pressing, giving, mixing, leaving traces in their wake.

Traces are structurally uncertain, neither one thing nor the other, or both one thing and the other. Much of *Figures in Red Boat* (fig. 6) occupies a space of in-betweenness: it is not quite abstract, not quite landscape; not quite now, not quite then; not quite here, not quite there. Not quite. As if cast in the light of a freshly set sun, the image is charged with a sense of the potency of in-between times – a witching hour – its atmosphere loaded with potential, rather than with actual activity. Ghostly is, perhaps unfortunately, the word. Like the spirit of these words that are allowed to synthesise, not always explicitly, after the fact, after the time, around the figures; they float upon the water's surface, to be absorbed, or rejected, by the saturated weave of canvas, and pixels on a screen, and fibres of a page. I am not sure if this amounts to 'actual activity', if this kind of ekphrastic drifting counts as either criticism or history but the spirit of this kind of treatment surely feels induced by the painting, my referent, itself.

⁵ This shifting between present and past tenses is deliberate for reasons that will become clear.

A red boat, put another way

That is one way of being with *Figures in Red Boat* (fig. 6), of getting to know it, to feel one's way around it. It is, as Gertrude Stein would call it, a beginning, there will be others, 'beginning again'.⁶ We will come back to her in a later beginning. But for now, another beginning might go something like this:

Fix upon it in one of its more exquisite intervals, the moment, for instance, of delicious recoil from the flood of water in summer heat. What is the whole physical life in that moment but a combination of natural elements to which science gives their names? But these elements, phosphorus and lime and delicate fibres, are present not in the human body alone: we detect them in places most remote from it. Our physical life is a perpetual motion of them – the passage of the blood, the wasting and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain by every ray of light and sound – processes which science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces. Like the elements of which we are composed, the action of these forces extends beyond us; it rusts iron and ripens corn. Far out on every side of us these elements are broadcast, driven by many forces; and birth and gesture and death and the springing of violets from the grave are but a few out of ten thousand resulting combinations. That clear perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours under which we group them – a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it. This at least of flame-like our life has, that it is but the concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways.

Or if we begin with the inward world of thought and feeling, the whirlpool is still more rapid, the flame more eager and devouring. There it is no longer the gradual darkening of the eye and fading of colour from the wall, – the movement of the shore side, where the water flows down indeed, though in apparent rest, – but the race of the midstream, a drift of momentary acts of sight and passion and thought. At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp importunate

⁶ Gertrude Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *A Stein Reader* Ulla E. Dydo ed. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996), p. 499.

reality, calling us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action. But when reflection begins to act upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force is suspended like a trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions – colour, odour, texture – in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further; the whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a swarm of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us, to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.

Analysis goes a step further still, and tells us that those impressions of the individual to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight; that each of them is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also; all that is actual in it being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is. To such a tremulous wisp constantly reforming itself on the stream, to a single sharp impression, with a sense in it, a relic more or less fleeting, of such moments gone by, what is real in our life fines itself down. It is with the movement, the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off – that continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves.

Not mine but

This other way is, of course, not mine but Walter Pater's.⁷ The three paragraphs that constitute the passage above – from 'Fix upon' to 'unweaving of ourselves' – is so familiar that I have taken the risk not to introduce it in advance, not to set it apart from the rest of the text. It is deliberately formatted, 1.5 spaced, without indentation in order that

⁷ Walter Pater, 'Conclusion', in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 233–239. I will refer back to elements of this passage throughout the course of this chapter.

it not be distinguished from the flow of my surrounding text. I even go so far as delaying its footnote. ‘Risk’ and ‘going so far as’ seem hyperbolic in the greater scheme of things but in academia the accusation of plagiarism weighs heavily. This gesture recalls the work of Benjamin Friedlander whose essay ‘Gertrude Stein: A Retrospective Criticism’ copies, almost in its entirety, a piece of criticism by Edgar Allen Poe called ‘Rufus Dawes: A Retrospective Criticism’. In it Friedlander extracts references to Dawes and replaces them with references to Stein.⁸ Whereas Friedlander’s focus is on the conceptual plagiaristic gesture of copying the text of others and re-framing it as his own, I am interested in the act of *absorbing* or *metabolising* or *digesting* the words of one, into the context of another. The point of my inclusion of Pater’s words, here, in this particular way, is to demonstrate – to *show* not *tell*, as the creative writing adage goes – its confluence, its continuum, with the words and images and thoughts that surround it.

There are other reasons too. Rather than allude to text in fragments – as I did in Chapter 2, which is peppered with Susan Sontag’s aphoristic voice – Pater’s words appear here in an unwieldy passage, a deluge spilled over the page. After much grappling I decided that to have treated Pater’s words as I did Sontag’s would risk misrepresenting them, at least in the first instance. Hers lend themselves to being cut, spliced and juxtaposed. His run together in swathes of long and meandering multi-clausal sentences as his thoughts gather, evolve, accrete. Instead of snatching at his words – ‘in the solidity with which language invests them’⁹ – a looser, more slippery understanding of them comes into being.

My choice to focus on this particular short text hinges on my first encounter with it, writing a Master’s thesis on ‘Peter Doig and Embodied Art Histories’. The Conclusion’s impressionistic focus builds up the effect of a dwelling on experience, analogous, as will become clearer, to the types of encounters rendered in paint by Doig. Its tone suggests a eulogy to art and the bodily encounter with art and history. It concerns both

⁸ See Friedlander, ‘Poe’s Poetics and Selected Essays’, in *Simulcast: Four Experiments in Criticism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), pp. 145–158, an excerpt of which also appears, and is introduced, in Benson and Connors, *Creative Criticism*, pp. 160–175. See also – a text I came upon, after writing this chapter – Kenneth Goldsmith’s chapbook *Gertrude Stein On Punctuation* (Newton, NJ: Abaton Books, 1999) in which he reproduces wholesale Stein’s ‘Poetry and Grammar’ followed by the same text minus all but its commas.

⁹ Pater, ‘Conclusion’, p. 235.

the way in which the body as subject, and art and history as objects, come into contact, the way in which they interpenetrate.¹⁰ The way they mutually permeate. It has the melancholy tone of an ending but none of the neatly tied up threads; that it was written before the rest of the book in which it first appeared, and for a different purpose, partially accounts for this.¹¹ It is unspecific, referring to no artwork in particular, and in fact does not even mention art until its penultimate page. Its structure is loose and exploratory, sometimes directionless, and thus enacts the sensation of viewing as a roaming around and drifting passage through art and thought, a sensation that relates closely to my own way of going about things.

The point of my study is not only to draw out points of shared reference and approach in Pater and Doig, but also to acknowledge, and allow for the development of, their points of confluence with my own writing. The confluences are many, but perhaps the most important in this context is the way in which Doig and Pater acknowledge the precarious transience of viewing, a transience that is echoed and embroiled in my approach to the material for this chapter. I will show that observing, and acknowledging the difficulty of the overlap of images and words, even at a chronological and consequential remove, tell us a good deal about the internal workings of experience, ideas, thought, and creative processes that ebb and flow often, and not insignificantly, concurrently and unselfconsciously.

In fact, the nature of Pater and Doig's emergence on these pages is as important as why they appear. To be clear about how that might be the case necessitates a detour, and one to which I will return at various points. In *Fragments of Union* (2002) Susan Manning draws on 'associative and analogical models of comparison initially derived from the

¹⁰ See my chapter 1 for examples of texts that enact this kind of permeation between subjects and objects but particularly good is Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley trans. (London and New York: Continuum, 2008); David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

¹¹ Though originally published in 1868 in an article on 'Poems by William Morris' published in *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, and later included in *Studies of the History of the Renaissance* (1873), it was notably omitted from subsequent editions of *The Renaissance* for fear that, in Pater's own words, 'it might possibly mislead'. Despite its brevity the text has become the most well known and oft cited of his oeuvre. In fact, although Pater developed the passage into the book length *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), the reading of this diminutive chapter has still come largely to determine his reception and characterisation in scholarship.

structuring principles of [...] Scottish and American texts'. She is specific about the nature of the comparisons she makes between writers and works, noting that they are characterised by 'confluence rather than influence'. And is not concerned with 'demonstrable direct pressure' of one writer on another but with 'networks of relationships and analogies' to which she alludes through the lens of Hume's 'Of the Association of Ideas' in the form of 'Resemblance, Contiguity and Causation'.¹² Key to Manning's argument is the distinction between individual thoughts and the way in which thoughts themselves might be linked in *the process of being thought*.¹³

This convergence of a text by Pater and paintings by Doig is founded on the idea that these works are thoughts which I am in *the process of thinking and/or writing* into a relationship. This writing into a relationship sees visual images absorb written words as written words absorb visual images, observing how the pairing of a writer and painter enacts a confluence. The relationship is founded on a type of 'reciprocity' as Richard Shiff might term it.¹⁴ This reciprocity is not, however, limited to a two-way process but multiplies as the discussion unfolds. The various agents at play here, Doig, Pater, contemporary scholars – like Susan Manning and, shortly, Wai Chee Dimock – and me, should all be understood as comprising and manifesting a mutual, though inconsistent, porosity.

Drawing out the nature of that confluence will, however, be hard-fought, ununified, unsystematic. Indeed, the process of partially wresting analogous strands present in Doig and Pater's work allows another confluence to materialise, between the works discussed and the language of that discussion. In Manning's study of the example of American unification, grammatical and syntactic structures are argued to embody both unity and fragmentation in the manner of a federation. Take heed, however; 'federative

¹² Susan Manning, *Fragments of Union: Making Connections in Scottish and American Writing* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 4–5, referencing David Hume, *An Enquiry into Human Understanding* (1748) Tom L. Beauchamp ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 107.

¹³ Manning, *Fragments of Union*, p. 108.

¹⁴ Richard Shiff discusses the reciprocity of touch in order to avoid other more dualistic propositions such as pitting the subjective (that is to say, deviant or figured) against the objective (that is to say, the normative or literal) in 'Constructing Physicality', *Art Journal*, 50(1) (1991), p. 43 after David Katz, *Der Aufbau der Tastwelt* (Leipzig: Barth, 1925).

vision', Manning points out, is 'in the nature of things both risky and contingent'.¹⁵ Though far from federative, the contingency upon which the language of this research rests is crucial. It is both the chapter's subject and object, the method at once enacted and reflected upon in the process.

The nature of the correspondences that build here and the ways in which they come to coalesce is processual. It emerges as associations are sparked, conjunctions bud and analogies grow. I choose my mixed metaphors deliberately in so doing conveying, I hope, a sense of the non-systematic ways in which these processes actually feel: rarely either unified or as carefully organised as a pure metaphor might imply. That is not to say that they are arbitrary though.¹⁶ I take my cue from Manning and what she terms the 'imaginative territory' that lies in the gaps between the two bodies of work that are her focus.¹⁷ The act of crossing divides that artificially separate culturally-constructed categories – historical periods, nations, media and genres – is loaded with the potential for a certain kind of imaginative exploration. It is my intention, then, to dwell on the effects of certain structural echoes, tonal synchronicities, chromatic affinities and metaphorical resemblances between one form and another. My discussion turns on what it is in the structure and material of these works that registers as analogous and how associations that are drawn from a subjective being relate beyond the (supposed) confines of the self to suggest another way of going about research. To borrow, again, from Manning's substantial leaning on grammatical analogy, my study takes its cue from connectives that are spatial and comparative rather than temporal, causal or sequential. Thus I will be thinking in terms of imaginative and potential relationships and passages between forms rather than absolute or culturally authenticated connections, witnessing, as a result, the conjunctions 'as' or 'like' as well as metaphors more broadly, being complicated by their use across historical periods, nations and media.

¹⁵ Manning, *Fragments of Union*, p. 287.

¹⁶ The idea of non-systematic thinking is explored further in chapter 1.

¹⁷ Manning, *Fragments of Union*, p. 2.

Manning likewise draws out connections across geographical borders, based on the spirit of the texts that ‘resonate mutually in [...] texture’. Their underlying syntactic structures make possible these connections rather than their overt contents or origins. As a result tensions between union and fragmentation persist in the texts produced during the Enlightenment and Romantic periods of Scotland and America that Manning writes into a relation. She argues, after Hume, that this tension is a reflection of a particular structure of thought. It allows her to identify systems of classification and listing based on the ‘principles of connection that may join, or keep apart, the elements’. She writes:

This is where the area of experience coheres - or fails to - where selves, and nations, may define themselves. The 'connective tissue' of grammar and syntax provides the cement to make sentences cohere internally; style determines the connectivity across sentences, of one with the next. But an avowed purpose of linking or joining (in collaboration, celebration, or lament) may also be betrayed by grammar and syntax that focuses attention on the nature of the spaces or interludes that frustrate the impulse to union and thereby preserve the fragments from incorporation in the whole. Sentence structure itself may be at once eloquent and silent.¹⁸

She goes on to reference Dugald Stewart who argues that it is ‘the transitions of language’ that constitute the means by which associations and their ‘degrees of intimacy’ converge or diverge, strongly or causally, slightly or capriciously, naturally or indissolubly.¹⁹

The specificity of language, of turns of phrase, of particular and imagistic word choices is, therefore, key. Descriptors suggest themselves as I prod nouns into atypical relations. Words, closely followed by ideas, take form, their surfacing induced by the nature of the images and methods of research from which they stem and around which they come to coalesce. Sometimes the absorption of images and words (and the interface between the two) is not always immediately clear and takes time to unfold. At times like these, you will already have noticed, the narrative of this text appears to drift. As my foci shift my writing performs its own particular

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 29, reference to Dugald Stewart, ‘On the Beautiful. Part First’, in *Philosophical Essays, The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, Sir William Hamilton ed., Vol. 5 (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable Co., 1855), p. 202.

convergence, only surfacing in this particular way, only taking on this particular character because of the nature of its subjects, objects and processes of research. W. J. T. Mitchell might call this 'showing seeing' that is to say, it is an 'invitation [...] to picture theory and perform theory as a visible, embodied, communal practice, not as the solitary introspection of a disembodied intelligence'.²⁰

Before *Figures in Red Boat* (fig. 6) could play any substantive role in the discussion, then, as with Zurbarán's *Four Vessels*, I spent time enacting its play of colour, tone, texture, and substance in words, partly as a way of familiarising myself with it, partly as a way of allowing its role in this chapter to be activated, to be cast off.²¹ This takes time and focus, as well as intermittent interjection; it bears further explanation and contextualisation.

The importance of focus and duration here is informed by the work of scholars like Mieke Bal or T. J. Clark whose writing about a single work or artist, over a substantial period, is recorded almost diaristically in order to retain the sense of the spontaneity of responses to artworks. In many ways, Bal's 2001 book, subtitled *The Architecture of Art Writing*, is unconventional. With chunks of her diary presented, in its original note-form, unedited, she walks us through a fragmented reading of her encounter with and through Louise Bourgeois's *Spider* (Tate, London, 1994). It is telling that the text begins not with an introduction but an 'Entrance'. Its title suggests that what is to come will be less a conventional laying out of the book's aims and methods and more a subtle initial familiarisation with the writing and the art that will come to make contact. In fact it frequently uses quite straightforwardly introductory openers like: 'In this essay I will consider [...]', 'I will discuss a number of issues [...]', 'I will argue that [...]'.²² But

²⁰ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture', in *Visual Culture: Critical Concepts in Visual and Cultural Studies*, Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 162.

²¹ Peter de Bolla might term this 'living through' aesthetic experience as opposed to having or making an aesthetic experience although I would disagree with him on the matter of where 'art' as the source of aesthetic experience is located. He claims that it is 'uniquely a feature of an aesthetic experience and not something within the object; although the tools we need to locate and understand that experience may appear to the viewer to reside in the object, this appearance is an illusion produced by our affective response'. It is worth noting that in contrast to my approach, treating my pairings as to some degree interrelated, De Bolla's treatment of his three case studies are kept entirely separate, as if to do otherwise would contaminate them. See de Bolla, *Art Matters*, p.15.

²² Bal, *Louise Bourgeois's Spider*, p. 4.

Bal's interest in reading Bourgeois' work 'as both object and subject of art-writing – of art history and art criticism' has certainly indirectly impacted the approach I am taking here.²³

Clark's *The Sight of Death* also uses a diaristic mode, this time edited. His two year (intermittent) diary account of viewing (and thinking about) two Poussin paintings feels like a self-conscious experiment, a challenge to and extension of moments of encounter with artwork. It combines an obsession with the minutiae of the viewing process – the context of the gallery, its light levels, other people's presence, Clark's state of mind – and microscopically close readings at, for example, the paintings' iconographic details and paint handling. Crucially, he characterises this text as not writing about or writing on but 'writing the image' as if the writing itself were a textual equivalent of the paintings.²⁴ My focus in getting to know Doig's painting is of a related, though slightly different, order. Though it turns on the close observation of particular paintings, it does so with an awareness of the potential for focus to escape the confines of the canvas or gallery.

Thus far, I have alluded to the ways in which Pater and Doig's resemblances manifest but the question of how their affinities emerge is equally pressing. What do their resemblances feel like and what happens when we draw attention to them? For clarity's sake a list of concrete terms or themes by which they coalesce might be useful but I am loathe to break their connections down in such a way, to systematise them into graspable subsections or what Pater might describe as 'tragic dividing forces'.²⁵ To do so would be at variance with the openness, hesitancy and irresolution that find kinship in their work. But it would also do a disservice to the way in which their convergence,

²³ *ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁴ Interestingly, there are similarities between turns of phrases in both this chapter and Clark's. See phrases like Clark's 'the process of seeing again and again' and 'aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface', p. 5 and examples from the current chapter like: 'In it ideas echo and swell invisibly in the depths of a painting and then roll and break the surface' or, 'single motifs appear again and again'. These similarities were not intentional but they are worth pointing out. And again there are crucial differences between my approach and Clark's. For example, he claims that writing about art 'should not flinch from making sense of the mute things it is looking at' that, as we shall see, will not be a priority here, as the 'unsystematic' nature (as I shall come to call it) of my close reading of Doig's *Figures in Red Boat* will reveal. Clark, *The Sight of Death*, p. 216. See also MIT and Afterall series of books (2009–2016) that focus on a single artwork which are also exercises durational processes of viewing art critically.

²⁵ Pater, 'Conclusion', p. 237.

and this chapter, emerged: falteringly, amorphously, uncertainly. Their resemblances do not result from clear points of precise contact, rather, they bleed in a more impressionistic, mercurial, way than a list would have us believe. Images and themes echo imperfectly, reverberations resound loosely and overlapping seepages present themselves.

Clustering

In Doig's paintings single motifs appear again and again: a figure dressed as a bat, figures playing cricket on a beach, boats and canoes drifting. His 2013 exhibition 'No Foreign Lands' focussed on his propensity to work through clusters of imagery. It emphasised the way that his images appear to proliferate in vast numbers around a common theme, allowing an idea to run on. In each of their iterations these motifs are subjected to modulated differences of process, time, media, colour and material. These have been termed 'variations' by others but I am calling the groups of works that converge around a specific theme, clusters, a term more impromptu than the more self-conscious and organised term 'series' implies.²⁶ Each cluster might include washed out prints, pencil sketches, charcoal drawings, oil paint roughly brushed on paper or canvas, tempera and distemper washed loosely over linen, working collages, barely-there watercolours, stained photographs and damaged canvases. Taken together they behave like mental images. As if under the influence of the distorting effect of a mind turning over and over a thought, these impressions – images that are nestled in what Pater would call 'the chamber of the individual mind' – find visual analogue in Doig's clusters.

Adopting Paterian terminology we might call Doig's propensity to work in series as exemplifying 'group[s] of impressions' that are 'constantly reforming'. As they are dwelled upon, these images make manifest 'the passage and dissolution of impressions'.

²⁶ Beatrix Ruf uses the term 'variation' and 'series' in 'Peter Doig's NOW', *Parkett*, 67 (2003), p. 81. Doig has described them as 'versions'. In an email to Ruf he writes: 'I paint versions because I think that the best ones are never done – one desires to go back for more, like in lots of other areas of life...more. One wants to see more, hear more, experience more and also hope for the same sensations again in all of the above...', email sent to Ruf on March 8, 2003, referenced in Ruf, 'Peter Doig's NOW', p 83. These allusions to 'sensations' contribute to my drawing Pater and Doig's work into relation. They also, incidentally, echo Susan Sontag's desire for writing about art 'to see more, to hear more, to feel more' in 'Against Interpretation', p. 14.

Take the *Gasthof Zur Muldentalsperre* cluster, in which two costumed figures look out from the centre of the image. The sketches associated with this series appear incomplete, half washed away, fragments, filaments, even, of the final image. They are in fact dated from between 2002 and 2004 and carried out no earlier than the tail end of the two years that it took Doig to produce the largest, and seemingly most complete, *Gasthof Zur Muldentalsperre* (Collection of Nancy Lauter McDougal, 2000–2002) painting (fig. 7). The sketches – variously executed in oil, watercolour, pencil and ink – are like Pater’s ‘impressions’, ‘unstable, flickering, inconsistent’. Indeed, even the ‘final’ image feels much less final, more like Pater’s ‘tremulous wisp’, displaying areas of dissolution or evanescence in the roadside trees and worn out sky. The sketches should not be construed as workings towards but as crucial elements of a whole idea. Perhaps they function more like ‘clauses’ in the context of a sentence.

Pater’s rolling sentences are similarly thronging with distinct but connected elements: ‘It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off – that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves’.²⁷ They appear as extended thought processes in which further thoughts accrue as he sets them to paper. This is precisely why they are difficult to pluck from their broader context – leading me to present them here as a passage intact – strings of clauses nestled in a landscape of other clauses. Each word and phrase conducts a swelling of an idea or a feeling, intimately connected to those that surround it. To take a sentence out of context therefore renders it bereft. It is as if each phrase were part of what we could call Pater’s *ecosystem of awareness* a phrase that continues the strong links to the reception of Doig’s work, characterised by one scholar as a ‘dense ecosystem of images’ where one motif breeds many versions as prints, as details, or as fully formed new configurations.²⁸

Sometimes it is as if Pater were describing the way that Doig’s motifs appear and reappear in infinite variation, like reflections dissolving, or as if Doig were painting visual images of Pater’s mellifluous thought processes embodied through his accretive

²⁷ Pater, ‘Conclusion’, p. 236.

²⁸ Johanne Sloane, ‘Hallucinating Landscapes, Canadian-Style’, in *Peter Doig*, Scott Watson ed. (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2001), p. 13.

writing style. Both build a sensation of amorphousness, bathing in their own fragility and serendipity, foregrounding networks of interconnected ideas that are in the ongoing process of being built, in practice, rather than cast in absolute or finished terms.

Compare, for example, Pater's attempts to encapsulate the process of viewing and the manner of viewing that Doig's *Figures in Red Boat* induces. Picture Pater's 'unstable' impressions before Doig's melting reflection of the red boat. Or Pater's image of the 'individual in his isolation' alongside Doig's silent, self-contained spectres. Or imagine Pater's 'dream of a world' accompanying Doig's scene which is largely rendered in dreamlike unspecificity (the 'real' world only impinging by degrees through fragments of recognisable figuration – palms, figures, boat). En masse, these effects build an effect of teetering instability.

In fact, impermanence permeates both Pater and Doig's work. Doig's painting references the passing of time obliquely, accruing as unintended stains or splatters, or as coats of pigment are applied, dried, overpainted or wiped away. He allows that passing to crystallise on the canvas as each layer adheres to its surface at different rates, showing through or being absorbed, variously. It also manifests through his evocation of styles, motifs, compositions from the art-historical cannon, as the section below on 'Reflection across history' will show.

Pater's 'Conclusion' dwells more explicitly on the feel of time passing or what he calls 'intervals'. He refers to it as a 'passage and dissolution' which becomes most obvious through his treatment of experience, tinged with melancholy. It is 'its awful brevity' which appears to pain Pater but it is the way in which he evokes the feeling of this interval that interests me.²⁹ He layers up his text with images or 'pulses' that expand the experience of the text itself, as if the text were enacting a life lived. He moves from 'summer heat', to 'springing violets' to rusting iron to 'the movement of the shore-side' to 'a tremulous wisp', to Novalis, to 'some tone on the hills', to 'a gemlike flame', to 'curious odours', to 'the microscope of thought', to Rousseau's Confessions, to Victor

²⁹ Pater, 'Conclusion', pp. 233, 236 and 237.

Hugo and ‘poetic passion’.³⁰ This textual accretion of processes, sensations, images, and stimuli itself performs the feeling of time passing.

Drift adrift

As the Doig and Pater affinities begin to condense in words on this page, further affinities emerge from their respective treatment by scholars and critics. In *Peter Doig: Works on Paper* (2005), for example, Margaret Atwood’s poetically tinged preface, entitled ‘Images drift...’, has Paterian overtones. Take her:

Images drift up from where they have been hiding [...] think of reflections on the surface, broken, reforming [...] think of a drowned thing, rising. [...] They come from the land of images, which is in this world and not in this world, which is in your mind and not in your mind.³¹

Compare this to Pater’s rumination on the stages by which observation progresses, described as, ‘A drift of momentary acts of sight and passion and thought’ as if the images, feelings and thoughts emerge – ‘rising’, in Atwood’s words – from unknown depths. Pater goes on, ‘But when reflexion begins to play upon these objects they are dissipated under its influence’.³² Though Atwood and Pater’s word choices are quite different this time – Atwood’s more definite ‘broken’ to Pater’s softer edged ‘dissipated’ – their accounts still focus on the scattered nature of images, as well as reflections. For Pater, the disrupting surface ripples are set in motion by our own actions, by ‘reflexion’, which this time might also refer to thought.³³

Such dislocating bands of undulating reflection ring a number of figures whose bodies come into direct contact with water in Doig’s paintings: rings encircle the woman’s finger tips in *Canoe Lake* (Yageo Foundation Collection, Taiwan, 1997–8), they expand out from the cop pictured shouting across an expanse of water in *Echo Lake* (Tate, London, 1998). And in *Blotter* (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, 1993) (fig. 8), in which a

³⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 233–234, pp. 236–237 and p. 239.

³¹ Margaret Atwood, ‘Images Drift...’, in *Peter Doig: Works on Paper*, Kadee Robbins ed. (New York: Rizzoli, 2005), pp. 7–8.

³² Pater, ‘Conclusion’, p. 235.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 235.

lone figure stands in the middle of a large thawing puddle looking at his feet while water creases outwards from him in roughly concentric circles. But the movement that Atwood and Pater evoke in their choice of words like ‘dissipate’ and ‘drift’ also calls to mind the character of pigment’s dispersal in *Figures in Red Boat* (fig. 6). Paint is only semi-directed, as if caught in the moment of seepage. Sometimes it appears to bleed into the weave of the canvas – fuzzing the boat’s motor – at others, its distribution is more hazy – in the lilac grey murk that bands the painting midway. At still others its flow downwards feels more urgent as if compelled by gravitational force – in red drips and pink waves.

The result is that the wholesale apprehension of images is frustrated. Pater’s images dissolve into the less stable term: ‘impressions’. And through impressions ‘all that is actual in [time] being a single moment, gone while we try to apprehend it, of which it may ever be more truly said that it has ceased to be than that it is’.³⁴ Even the structure of the sentence itself seems to dissolve through double negatives here, raveling and unraveling as it goes. But if in the end, it ‘ceases to be than that it is’, then the image and our experience of the image (which for Pater is one and the same) are the focus. Any ‘theory, or idea, or system, which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract morality we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us.’³⁵ This sentiment is doubled in Atwood’s introduction to *Doig* too:

‘If the images are messengers, what is the message they carry? We are what has been inscribed, they say. Inscribed on you. We are where you have been. We are where you are.

Look at us. Look into us. Make of us what you can.
Here you are.’³⁶

In both cases the image’s hold on us depends upon a felt experience in which the image and the viewer become mutually absorbed: ‘We are where you are [...] Here you are’.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 209.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 211–212.

³⁶ Atwood, ‘Images Drift’, p. 8, original italics.

Like this thesis, subjectively experienced thoughts and acts are at the helm but they do not impose an overarching or predetermined method.

This is why in relation to Pater and Doig (and this thesis) it feels right to speak of emergence, to speak of not only images, but words, and sentences, ‘arriv[ing] without being summoned’.³⁷ Drifting is enacted by Doig’s materials as they spread across the canvas – seeping, dripping, running. By the mental images and textures that his paintings, in turn, stir – mildew, mist, water. And by the innumerable single stray boats, always pictured alone, on still (or almost still) water, cast off but rarely with purpose or momentum, drifting.

Drifting also comes to the fore through the presence of the characters who inhabit his paintings. In the vast majority Doig lingers on solitary figures and introverts. Among many other paintings and series these include: *Jetty* (Mima and César Reyes Collection, Puerto Rico, 1994), *Echo Lake*, *Canoe Lake*, *Figure in Mountainscape* (Pinchuk Art Centre, Kiev, 1997–8), *Corn Cob* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1994), *Young Bean Farmer* (Collection of Victoria and Warren Miro, London, 1991), *Stag* (Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg, 2002–5), *Purple Jesus (Black Rainbow)* (Monsoon Art Collection, 2006), *Girl in White with Trees* (Bonnefantenmuseum Maastricht, 2001–2), *Lapeyrouse Wall* (Private Collection, 2004) and *100 Years Ago* (Collection of Beth Swofford, 2000) (fig. 9). The nineteenth-century French bohemian figure in *Metropolitain (House of Pictures)* (Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, 2004) (fig. 14) resembles the central figure in Honoré Daumier’s painting *The Print Collector* (The Art Institute of Chicago, 1857–63). In Doig’s hands the figure is unleashed into the blue green expanse of a Caribbean backdrop. Elsewhere the trench-coated figure in *House of Pictures* (Private Collection, 2000–2) – sporting cowboy boots, trench coat and long flowing red hair – is pictured standing outside the gallery windows and looking in. Something about his attire suggests that he is in costume and so, out of place and out of time.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 7.

Melancholy, and sometimes foreboding, hangs around figures like these, their isolation even more pronounced, depicted often in silhouette or outline or shadow. Now recall Pater's take on impressions seen as an 'impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world' where 'the whole scope of observation is dwarfed to the narrow chamber of the individual mind.'³⁸ Or view Pater's 'vanishing away' alongside the faltering grey outline of the man in Doig's *Figure by a Pool* (The collection of Helen and Charles Schwab, 2008–12) or the barely-there drawn calves and pointed feet that poke out of the watery area of the same painting.³⁹ Or imagine the following words by Pater as a gallery caption: 'While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems, by a lifted horizon, to set the spirit free for a moment'. With such hypothetical proximity Pater's words might find unexpected sympathy with Doig's paintings; in *Blotter* the figure's reflection appears to liquefy or 'melt' or in *100 Years Ago* in which an island appears to rise, even float upon, a 'lifted horizon'.⁴⁰

Reflections go further

We have already touched on rippled reflections but their prevalence in Doig's imagery calls for further scrutiny, not least because reflections are such a trope in the history of art. Encompassing the idea of the double, the mirror image, the image and the painting, reflection connotes contemplation, impression, expression and revelation. Reflections, as images, have been caught up in complicated associations relating to 'equivalence' and 'likeness'. But the type of reflection Doig plays with is not always literal, and never throws back a sharply rendered image. Doig's reflections are usually partial, muddled, if not all-out obscured, casting back likenesses and unlikenesses. A similarly imperfect, incomplete, reflection on images and imagery is happening here too, as we speak.

It is worth looking closely at another of the many images in which reflections figure large. *Reflection (What does your soul look like)* (Mima and César Reyes Collection, Puerto Rico, 1996) (fig. 10) is a portrait-format painting depicting an encounter with a

³⁸ Pater, 'Conclusion', p. 235.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 236.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 237.

partial figure, cut off at mid-calf. The figure's reflection is pictured whole and is surrounded by further reflections of winter trees seen on the skin of a pond ringed by snow or ice. Water is represented through a lurid mustard green base with rusty red silhouetted reflections, its surface is further mottled by layers of variously coloured paint work. Black, cream and white marks wind their way across the surface like veins around the body. Sometimes their branch-like meandering leads into less figurative realms. At other times a painted mark begins abstractly only lapsing into figuration after a time, such as when reflections are born of random red drips that Doig has chased down the canvas and developed into something more representational, something more controlled.

The placement of the figure in this painting is interesting, especially when referenced against the reflexivity of the painting's title. It is pictured not looking down at its own reflection but facing away from it. What does your soul look like, we ask the anonymous figure's double? What impressions can we glean from your swampy reflection? How much can we know of you, separated as we are at a slippery remove across an expanse of water and/or paint and available to us by means of a mere reflection, shadow, outline, representation, art?

But why are reflections significant in the context of this thesis? The motif of reflections is part of some of the originary theories of representation. In the myth of Narcissus, reflections are treated as the loaded doubles of the reflected; Narcissus himself is deceived by his own reflection because of its close verisimilitude. And as Leon Battista Alberti noted in 1435 'What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water in the fountain?'.⁴¹ Whereas traditionally in the history of art the clarity of reflections is seen as the closest counterpart to art's mimetic potential, for Doig reflections' are more akin to shadows, incomplete, overlapping with other reflections and obscured by the viscosity of paint as water or water as paint. Doig's doubles, as reflections or shadows or repetitions, are both like and unlike the objects by which they are cast. Usually they are blurred, inconsistent approximations, impressions that merge with the rest of the canvas.

⁴¹ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 64.

But reflection's doubling effect features even more strongly through a more generalised multiplication and repetition. Anonymous figures appear and reappear: girl in a tree, man dragging a pelican, top-hatted flaneur. Scenes are revisited and repurposed: Canadian snow-capped mountains, a Kerala seaside shack, a particular patch of Trinidadian wall, and an island off the Port of Spain. Motifs are replicated and morphed: canoes, boats, palms, skiers, reflections, homes. And compositional techniques reused – horizon lines, obscuring veils, rectangular cutouts, windows or frames; in each iteration, the clusters are transformed. Sometimes these are plucked from recognisable characters in the art canon; at others they remain anonymous, cut out from newspaper articles, prized from family photographs, found postcards or dredged from memory. Johanne Sloan describes this method of image making as ecosystemic.⁴² In it ideas echo and swell invisibly in the depths of a painting and then roll and break the surface, sometimes loudly as an iconic gesture (like his canoe paintings), sometimes quietly as a mere pointer to something else – a particular painterly texture, 'a lifted horizon'.⁴³

Is it too far to see in the spirit of this multiplicity Pater's 'variegated' 'impressions'? To see Doig's paintings as the site where 'vital forces unite', where the 'hard gem-like flame' burns, inducing a 'stirring of the senses'? Could we not pilfer Pater's words like this, and direct them at just about any art that particularly took our fancy? I'm not sure we could, because the sensation of the terms in question shares so much of the sensation of, say, Doig's *Gasthof zur Muldentalsperre* (fig. 7) with its suggestive colour palette of blues and greens and yellows, its bejewelled patchwork wall jetty, semi-grounded by beige and a touch of black, its motley accretions of wrought-through paint applied variously – globbily, and washily, and fuzzily – and star-studded with a surface mist of white.

Reflection across history

The consequence of this proliferation of repeated motifs, familiar gestures and compositional structures reveals the nature of Doig's thinking about art that tracks

⁴² Sloan, 'Hallucinating Landscapes', p. 13.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 237.

across rather than through history. The particular character of a wash of paint, combination of hues, or a cluster of figures is subtly evocative of something we feel like we might have seen before. In a painting like *Echo Lake* Sloan sees ‘the spirits of Edvard Munch, Jackson Pollock and Tom Thomson’.⁴⁴ Scott Watson has noted affinities between Doig and David Milne, giving the impression that Doig’s whole oeuvre acts as a mass reflection and refraction of a particular history of art.⁴⁵

In *100 Years Ago (Carrera)* (Centre Pompidou, 2001) (fig. 11) Catherine Grenier, for example, sees ‘history [... as] the central theme’. She draws out the painting’s connection with a series of elements that are trans-historically sourced. The figure and the canoe derive from an album insert from the 1970s by the Allman brothers, the island in the background from Arnold Böcklin’s *Die Toteninsel* (Kunstmuseum Basel, 1880) (fig. 12) and the structural horizontal motifs from Henri Matisse’s *Baigneuse à la Tortue* (Art Museum, St Louis, 1908).⁴⁶ On this painting, Richard Shiff has specified Barnett Newman’s zip paintings as being influential,⁴⁷ whereas Keith Hartley has most recently named Matisse’s *Window at Collioure* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1914) as another ‘apposite’ ‘influence’.⁴⁸

Keith Hartley’s 2013 catalogue essay goes to great lengths to draw out the various threads of Doig’s indebtedness. The problem, however, lies in how we frame these kinds of visual resonances or, as Hartley terms them after Picasso, ‘visual assonances’.⁴⁹ He specifies Edvard Munch, Anselm Kiefer and Sigmar Polke but later builds visual narratives connecting, for example, Doig’s *House of Pictures (Carrera)* (Gayle and Paul Stoffel, 2004) (fig. 13) and *Metropolitain (House of Pictures)* (Pinakothek der Moderne,

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 14.

⁴⁵ Scott Watson, ‘Peter Doig: Twenty Questions’ (extract), in *Peter Doig*, Adrian Searle, Kitty Scott and Catherine Grenier, eds. (London and New York: Phaidon, 2007), p. 131.

⁴⁶ Catherine Grenier, ‘Reconquering the World: 100 Years Ago’, in *Peter Doig*, Searle, Scott, Grenier eds., (London: Phaidon, 2007), p. 108–9.

⁴⁷ Richard Shiff, ‘Drift’, in *Peter Doig*, Shiff and Catherine Lampert contr. (New York: Rizzoli, 2011), p. 320.

⁴⁸ Keith Hartley, ‘Visual Intelligence’, in *No Foreign Lands*, Hilton Als, Stephane Aquin, Keith Hartley, Angus Cook, Peter Doig contr. (National Gallery of Scotland; Montreal Museum of Arts; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2013), p. 65.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 52.

Munich, 2004) (fig. 14) with Honoré Daumier's *The Print Collector* and Édouard Manet's *The Absinthe Drinker* (Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, 1859) (fig. 15). His conflation of this cluster of images turns, persuasively, on a discarded beer bottle and the dishevelled top-hatted figure. The trouble with Hartley's analysis, however, is that it depends upon a biography of Doig, of his movements from one country to another and his seeing specific exhibitions, to verify that one artist or another had a measurable 'impact' on his paintings.⁵⁰ 'Something cannot come out of nothing,' Hartley insists, 'and ideas have to be born and nourished'.⁵¹ Hartley's reading of Doig's painting is founded on causal relationships in history, telling the story of beginnings and influences, developments, and impacts. Doig's assimilation of history comes about, I rather argue, with more subtlety than this, a subtlety not lost on Catherine Grenier who emphasises how an image 'takes its meaning not from its origin – what we know about it – but from the matter that constitutes it, from the making-evident, by means of paint, of its mystery'.⁵² That is to say, by the specific quality and nature of its assimilation.

Doig uses historical images as material in their own right, bringing about their assimilation into the fabric of his paintings. They appear to grow out of his repeated turn to interconnected reflection on and around landscape, art, film, culture, advertising and music. The historical references alluded to in Doig's images act as a visual counterpart to what Gavin Parkinson, after Hayden White, has termed a 'Metafictional Historiography of Art'.⁵³ In relation to the history of art, such a historiography is formed of 'reflexive strategies' which write 'through, mirrors, echoes, and rebound[] off art', much like Doig mirrors and reflects motifs over and over again.⁵⁴ It is an assimilation I

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 56.

⁵² Grenier, 'Reconquering the World', pp. 106–107.

⁵³ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014). Gavin Parkinson, 'Metafictional Historiography of Art', <https://courtauld.ac.uk/people/gavin-parkinson> [accessed January 31, 2013] since removed.

⁵⁴ Parkinson shares my frustration with the continued dominance of Art Histories written in the mode of 'detective fiction'. In his approach to the work of Paul Delvaux Parkinson is in search of 'an art writing that sits alongside [the artwork] without attempting to seek a resolution through rationalist, causal narrative meant to grid story, meaning, explanation, or a 'correct' or 'best' interpretation onto it', in 'The Delvaux Mystery', p. 313.

am in some ways attempting here – assimilating art in writing, Pater in Doig, Doig in Pater and so on.

History, doubled and reflected

A complementary echoic reflection of historical reference appears in Pater too. Many have noted the epigraph to Pater's 'Conclusion' which sets the tone of his relationship to and dependence on history. A quote from Heraclitus in the original Greek reads: Λέγει που Ἡράκλειτος ὅτι πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει – 'All things give way: nothing remaineth'.⁵⁵ According to Carolyn Williams this is Pater's shorthand way of identifying "'mythic" recapitulations in the history of thought', as a reflection, a doubling of history. Common themes, she notes, are threaded through the 'Conclusion', introduced early on and then returned to. In their later iterations they are transformed, metamorphosed through the intervening text. She takes the example of the moment which is firstly predominantly characterised as fleeting – Pater's in 'perpetual motion'. When he returns to the moment, however, this impermanence is secondary, giving way to beauty and form: 'Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face'. Williams notes the 'extraordinary metaphorical doubleness and transformation' where 'all of the figures are [later] reworked and transvalued'.⁵⁶

Other critics like Billie Andrew Inman, Wolfgang Iser, and Paul Barolsky all articulate Pater's conception of and relationship with history in slightly different ways. Inman excavates Pater's texts, attempting to identify precisely their intertextuality and intellectual evolution. He sees traces of William Morris's *Earthly Paradise* Parts I and II as well as speculating on the impact of specific scientific studies by George Henry Lewes, for example, or Herbert Spencer. At times these hypotheses stem from 'verbal similarity', at others they are based on a cross-referencing of books that Pater had borrowed from public libraries. He uses this research as proof of Pater's intellectual

⁵⁵ Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 14–15; Giles Whitely, 'Pater's Heraclitus: Irony and the Historical Method', in *Pater the Classicist: Classical Scholarship, Reception, and Aestheticism*, Charles Martindale, Stefano Evangelista and Elizabeth Prettejohn eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 261.

⁵⁶ Williams refers to figures introduced in paragraphs one and two of the Conclusion which, she argues, are 'reworked in paragraphs three to five. 'Figures' references the term as used in literary criticism, *Transfigured World*, pp. 27–28. See Pater, 'Conclusion', p. 232–238.

trajectory and indebtedness. At one point, for example, Inman claims that Pater ‘was careful to follow a principle enunciated by’ Hegel in *Ästhetik*, which he supports with evidence of Pater’s having borrowed the book between 28 April and 23 May 1863.⁵⁷ Inman’s archival research is painstaking and clearly evidences the multifariousness of Pater’s thinking. But in its attempts to account for every reference and identify every influence it does little to convey the nature of Pater’s intuitive, responsive thought, its flowing and eddying, its accumulation and freewheeling.

Pater’s assimilation of history is more responsively addressed by Iser. The main thrust of Pater’s work, Iser argues, ‘is to break down all cognitive pigeon-holing’. In contrast to Inman, Iser sees ‘the historicist approach focussing on motives, parallels, and influences’ as lacking the ‘criteria that would enable us to assess Pater’s work comprehensively’.⁵⁸ For Iser, the Victorian’s understanding of the past is embodied in the very form of his writing. Iser understands that ‘aestheticism is not an ordered phenomenon’ and therefore we should not submit aestheticist discussions to the same tests that we might a method of research that lends itself to a more ‘positivistic tradition’ of evidence appraisal.⁵⁹ This ‘aesthetic attitude’, as Iser terms it, is essential to Pater’s thinking and is performed in his verbal expression and writing structure. Ideas ‘preoccupied Pater simultaneously’, experiences are addressed in the way they are felt and so ‘remain amorphous’, and impressions imprecise.⁶⁰ This understanding, in turn, allows Iser to address the ways in which Pater’s thought is ‘distilled out of [...] fragments’ and formed ‘by the contingency of association’.⁶¹ It will, at this point be clear that this reading of Pater strongly evokes the spirit of this thesis too.

Wai Chee Dimock, one of the most lithe contemporary thinkers, to whom this chapter returns at various points, might refer to this evanescent conception of experience and

⁵⁷ Billie Andrew Inman, ‘The Intellectual Contexts for Pater’s ‘Conclusion’, in *Walter Pater: And Imaginative Sense of Fact*, Philip Dodd ed. (London: Frank Cass, 1981), pp. 12–15.

⁵⁸ Wolfgang Iser, *The Aesthetic Moment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 4.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 4, 29 and 36.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, pp. 5 and 37.

understanding as a ‘variable morphology’.⁶² Dimock’s particular ‘morphology’ is enabled by her linking together of a novelist, dramatist, and poet: Henry James, Colm Tóibín, and W. B. Yeats. She characterises their roles in her article as being in a relationship of hosting and being hosted.⁶³ After Jacques Derrida, Dimock knows well the tensions associated with hospitality – the roles of host and hosted are neither entirely clear cut, nor straightforwardly benign – which is precisely the point. She is interested in seeing what happens when one specific form or genre is read against the backdrop, or in the environment, of another. This recontextualisation of art forms does not come about through historicist research. Dimock is fascinated by the effect of reading artworks outside of the context in which they were initially conceived or produced, by how the terms of our engagement with the artwork morphs. To do so, she knows, rarely makes for a coherent critical narrative, however: what ‘appears primary in one locale can [...] lapse into secondariness in another’. It renders criticism, as she puts it, ‘episodic’, ‘rangy’, ‘proliferating’, ‘scattered, chaotic, contextually vacillating, not easily generalizable’, qualities that feel quite at home here too.⁶⁴

Such a disinclination to historicise and an inclination, instead, to meet scholarship on its own terms, is also shared by Paul Barolsky. Barolsky comes clean early on, as if in apology to his academic readers, describing his book on Pater as an ‘essay’ and ‘a sympathetic response to the very suggestiveness of Pater’s prose’.⁶⁵ Despite his attraction to Pater’s sensuous evocativeness, he still sometimes falls into the trap (or is it a habit?) of attempting to trace the poetic structures and analogies deployed by Pater back to their original sources and experiences an ‘overwhelming’ need for these ‘to be *excavated*’ (my emphasis). But Barolsky also recognises that the figures Pater echoes are not straightforward sources. Rather, they are ‘artistically “threaded through”’, intrinsic therefore to the matter of Pater’s expression, not merely its content.⁶⁶ In fact, Barolsky goes on to describe how in Pater’s text ‘memory is continuously drawn into

⁶² Dimock, ‘Weak Theory’, p. 738.

⁶³ *ibid.*, pp. 732 and 738.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 737.

⁶⁵ Paul Barolsky, *Walter Pater’s Renaissance* (Pennsylvania and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), p. xi. This apologetic reference to the essay is particularly interesting in the context of my discussion of the essay in chapter 1 here.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 25.

play as it absorbs, one upon another, the sensations of history, condensing these into perfect moments, exquisite pauses in time'.⁶⁷

That turn of phrase loops figuratively back, once again, to Doig, in particular to Hartley's description of his *100 Years Ago* series as 'a condensation of sensation'. We should note that Hartley does not perceive an *excavation* of sensation (in the manner of Inman, and even Barolsky). Instead he dwells on the feeling of the image's condensation, the point at which it is transformed from one essential state to another. The transition is not fixed but is in a state of passing, precipitated by two states of matter of differing temperatures coming into contact. And so we pass between states of matter, as between genres. Morphing from one genre to another we see how the amorphousness of experience and thoughts (whether visual or verbal) metamorphose on contact with a surface (whether paper or canvas); we bear witness too to this metamorphosis. Hartley draws out how paintings from this period settle between 'condensation and stability'.⁶⁸ The overall effect of this blue banding is crucial, argues Hartley.

100 Years Ago (Carrera) (fig. 9) for example, is split horizontally flag-like into near-thirds of blues. It is punctuated by a lush island that presses above the horizon and a rusty-orange canoe that stretches across the nearly three metre expanse of the canvas two-thirds of the way down. Each blue stripe increases slightly in depth: the top strip is the narrowest and also the deepest steely blue. It is marked by uneven downward washes like swathes of rain seen from a distance. They stop sharply at the horizon line. Below it lies the middle and lightest section. Here paint is laid on, not in a wash but in smaller pushier smudges; zones of icy blue merge into zones of green tinged cream. Though it reads as water, it in fact does little to echo the sensation of water, instead it almost feels coloured-in. Sandwiched between this middle band and the lowermost band comes the interruption of the canoe, a bold, elegant and contrastive belt of colour. It is the presence of the boat that establishes the sense of water; the reflection of the front end of the vessel and the man sitting in it melt the surface of blue away into short-lived

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 27.

⁶⁸ Hartley, 'Visual Intelligence', p. 64. quoting Matisse from 'Notes of a Painter', in *Matisse on Art*, Jack D. Flam ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 36. Original emphases.

orange ripples. And finally, the colour of the lower band is set midway between the other blues. Here Doig continues to evoke a sense of wateriness, not through the horizontality or curvature of waves but through a more vertical rough wash. What is significant about this banding is that it provides a sense of structure, containment and comfort in its repetition; a morning, noon, and night, somehow recalling Pater's 'dividing of forces on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening.'⁶⁹

And so, drawn back again 'by a lifted horizon, to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange flowers, and curious odours', the sensation of time appears variously to fly, hang and congeal; it is reflected in Doig's paintings as much as Pater's words.⁷⁰ The way that Doig allows his painting to become the site of confluence of historical and visual references is significant. Thus, as mentioned above, *100 Years ago (Carrera)* has been prised apart in critical accounts for its visual references ranging from the Allman brothers to Arnold Böcklin, Matisse and Barnett Newman.⁷¹ But to describe the range of references in such a way does little justice to the specific nature of the amalgam in his painted surfaces. The accumulation of external visual references in *100 Years ago (Carrera)* is not forced. They are not collaged, or cut and pasted in inverted commas, as, for example in, Friedrich Kunath's *Old Love* (Location unknown, 2014) (fig. 16). *Old Love* is an explicit riff on George Caleb Bingham's *Fur Traders of the Missouri* (Met Museum, New York, 1845) (fig. 17) in the same hazy atmosphere, the side-on canoe is complete with the same characters: a black cat and two men, one looking out at us melancholically, the other whose hat is replaced with an American-style trucker cap. Overlaid on this composition is a line drawing of a naked woman, whose attention is held behind her by a cartoon-like disembodied arm holding out a bottle of yellow liquid labeled 'Old Love'. It appears like a transfiguration, as if the love-sick central figure's fantasy hangs above his head. In contrast to the superimposition of contemporary line drawings, a Caspar David Friedrich-style landscape emerges from Bingham's original landscape; a setting sun is raised above a receding river whose pinewood banks are picked out but in hazy

⁶⁹ Pater, 'Conclusion', p. 237.

⁷⁰ Pater, 'Conclusion', p. 237.

⁷¹ Grenier, 'Reconquering the World', p. 100.

silhouette. Kunath appropriates, therefore, specific cultural matter, from German Romanticism to twentieth-century drawing and cartoon, while ensuring that its origins remain clearly distinguishable. These art-historical references, feel, however, in conflict, abutted rather than merged.

In contrast, the nature and effect of Doig's references is accretive; they swell as visual motifs and materials and techniques make contact with each other through an imagined history. To characterise these as a passage through visual memory rather than a trail picked between visual references helps to draw out the unpredictable, contingent sensation of their points of contact. Doig's paintings tend to function as the site of visual, cultural and epiphenomenal confluences and allusions. Hartley characterises this tendency as manifesting Doig's 'visual intelligence', his reading of Doig akin to the contingency of associations and historical synthesising that Iser and Barolsky see in Pater.⁷² In dwelling on both Doig and Pater's comparable handling of such historical connections which appear to coagulate on the page and the canvas, I am simultaneously drawing allusions to the way that I envisage visual and lyrical experiences emerging through this thesis: forms of understanding, ways of perceiving the world are drawn out, evoking the sensation of thinking – and in the case of this thesis, writing – things into association.⁷³

As we have seen, Doig's paintings resonate beyond themselves in various ways, sometimes as a specific visual echo, but at others, such as in *Window Pane* (Collection of Victoria and Warren Miro, 1993) (fig. 18), visual resonances are more obscured, less easy to identify. Uncharacteristically, *Window Pane* is unpeopled and contains few recognisable narrative motifs. It depicts reflections on what appears to be a partially frozen woodland pond, and is pictured in close-up with no horizon for reprieve. On its outermost surface the multi-layered canvas of beiges and ochres and mossy hues, are unevenly scattered flecks of white. Near-vertical brown streaks denote teased reflections of winter trees seen through a murky asymmetrical opening of water. They are

⁷² Hartley, 'Visual Intelligence', p. 52; Iser, *The Aesthetic Moment*, p. 37; Barolsky, *Walter Pater's Renaissance*, p. 28.

⁷³ Hartley, 'Visual Intelligence', pp. 52–53 (after Rudolph Arnheim) in *Visual Thinking* (London: University of California Press, 1969).

surrounded by a more opaque mottling or stippling, suggestive of a clouded icy surface. Traces of those dark trunk-like smears are visible beneath the icy zones too, though here, partially obscured by subsequent layers of pigment, they turn green, merging, dissolving abstractly with the painting's general surface colour and texture.

Oscillating between wet splatters and dry sprays, smudgy entrails and lighter drips, translucent washes and thick daubs, it is the nature of *Window Pane*'s marks, as opposed to what they represent, that appears so expansive, its painterly feel referencing, or at least recalling, beyond itself. There is something of a damp wall in the quality of its paint, as if a bloom of mould threatens to engulf its surface, or of a limescale encrusted old enamel bath. This reference to natural phenomena recalls Pater's turn to the 'delicious recoil from the flood of water', 'the fading of colour from the wall' and the rusting of iron. Noting that 'these elements, phosphorus and lime and delicate fibres, are present not in the human body alone': we detect their resonances in places most remote from it too.⁷⁴

Here, back to Doig, through my recourse to comparisons to mould, mist, dirt and limescale, other resonances resound. There is something in *Window Pane* of the lower half of William Morris Hunt's melancholic *Reflections in the Water* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1877), or the patchy patina of the mirror in Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (The Courtauld Gallery, 1882) (fig. 19). Like Richard Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park Series* (Various locations, 1967–88), the effect of the range of visual build-up of paint on different planes, as layers and strata, makes manifest the process of constructing the painting, and therefore also the process of thinking through it. Doig often works like this, allowing a build-up of paint that also exposes vestiges of pigment past, pointing towards a painting's visual ancestry, delighting in the accumulative value of painterly touch and absorbing and reforming phenomenal and artistic allusions.

But what is the nature of this thinking through paint? Colour is built up in layers of patchy pigment, applied fitfully not uniformly. There is nothing consistent about it. Its surface appears abraded; weathered by time, air, water or the effect of another pigment next to it, or beneath it or above it. Doig's touch feels insistent and insatiable as if he

⁷⁴ Pater, 'Conclusion', p. 233.

sways between coercion and succumbing, sailing and drifting, prodding the paint into place whilst also riding the wave of its natural propensity to drip, wash, soak, smudge, bleed and blur. In this multitude of touches it is as if we are privy to the drawn-out effect of time, passed and passing.

Now, recall Pater's words, whose sentences I have already described as 'thronging', running on, accruing, expanding with urgency, greedily folding you into them. 'Our one chance,' he writes, is in 'getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time.'⁷⁵ These 'pulsations' are garnered as much from the 'fresh writings of Voltaire' as the 'work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend'.⁷⁶ Pater's 'pulsations' themselves pulse as they accumulate by 'eager observation' of a welter of experiences. Citations of Novalis segue into 'some tone of the hills or sea', and on to 'strange dyes, strange flowers and curious odours' and later still, 'High passions give one this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, political or religious enthusiasm, or the "enthusiasm of humanity"'.⁷⁷ The spirit of this impressionistic interconnectedness conflates interests in art, song, culture, life, history, philosophy, religion, science and nature ('phosphorus and lime and delicate fibres').⁷⁸ Pater's expansiveness depends upon 'a quickened, multiplied consciousness', that crosses genres and disciplines, people and historical periods.⁷⁹ As I have been doing here.

This kind of consciousness only comes when we are 'for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions', new sensations, new phenomena. It leads to a 'stirring in the senses', the arousal of our sensory faculties breathlessly gathering ground in Pater's essay, variously climaxing and relaxing, breaking wave-like on the page.⁸⁰ His 'perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves' is one such climax, after

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 238.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 238 and 237.

⁷⁷ This sentence was amended in the third edition to read: 'Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us.' Because of the more specific nature of the original I have chosen to refer to the original version in this instance. *ibid.*, p. 238.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 233.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 238.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p. 237.

this his words loosen their grip momentarily, eddying around a Novalis quote: ‘Philosophiren ist dephlegmatisiren, vivificiren’ and gaining traction again with the enumeration of observations which appear to swell – ‘Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us, – for that moment only’. The drama of this sentence is stoked by the intermittent repetition of ‘every... some... or... some... or... some... or... or...’ giving the illusion of layering of open horizons and possibilities. The rhythm is quickly broken though, with the final ‘only’ tagged on the end, and left to hang, or drift.⁸¹

Ulrike Stamm picks apart Pater’s configuration of the passage of time by isolating certain recurring visual motifs: the stream and the flame, the flow of water, the web, and the action of weaving. Stamm points to the ‘opposite concepts of temporality’ that Pater unleashes. On the one hand time is moving and in constant transformation; on the other, it is ‘constructive [...] building larger and larger constructs and offering simultaneity instead of development’.⁸² Stamm, following Williams, reads Pater’s final move as, paradoxically, to combine the two: time becomes both spatial and temporal, both in stasis and moving, as both ‘process and structure’. Regarding Pater’s contradictory phrase, ‘to burn always with this hard gem-like flame’, Stamm argues, for example, that: ‘The inconsistency and instability of the flame represents the mobility of character, the opposite aspects of the unchanging, almost eternal stability of the jewel stand for the intensification and concentration of experience’.⁸³ The argument is especially striking when viewed against the backdrop of Doig’s painting, particularly those produced during the first decade of this millennium. Hartley, you will remember, wrote of these as embodying a condensation where in *100 Years Ago (Carrera)* (fig. 11) passages of fluidity and wash and drift of sky, sea and reflection are contained within a simple structural breakdown of the canvas into mindful horizontal bands, which then I referred to as the painting’s morning, noon and night, with episodic historical and cultural referencing simultaneously congealing on its surface.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 236.

⁸² Ulrike Stamm, ‘Hofmannsthal’s Variation on a Paterian Theme’, in *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe*, Stephen Bann ed. (London and New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), pp. 156–157.

⁸³ Stamm, ‘Hofmannsthal’s Variation’, p. 157.

Pater and Doig's evocation of time is never systematic, and never chronological. Catherine Grenier has described Doig's relation to modernism as 'free' yet 'remaining part of a modern lineage.'⁸⁴ While Bloom describes Pater as 'the heir of a tradition', but also refers to him as having 'fathered the future'.⁸⁵ Beautiful though these turns of phrase are, they are inadequate in conceptualising and evoking Doig and Pater's handling of the past and the future. Bloom's, and Grenier's, metaphors are problematic because they do not take the a-chronological complexity of their work into account. Pater's connection to the past and the future cannot be portrayed in such linear terms, rather it is a 'concurrence, renewed from moment to moment'.⁸⁶ This 'simultaneity', as Stamm terms it, characterises works of the past, in the language of both his present and this present.⁸⁷

Accident

Doig and Pater's embrace of chance is one way to avoid systematically linear conceptions of time. In Doig's paintings chance manifests not only as traces of a thought process but also, perhaps more explicitly, in his materials. His paintings are built on a balance between intentional and accidental mark making, some of which I have discussed above in the repetition or echoes of motifs. But a less direct example of his embrace of serendipity occurs in the way that he works with drips. Sometimes he leaves these drawn out drips to their own devices, to be read as drips or abstract markings, a way of building visual texture. But sometimes they can be read as being representative of something more specific like a branch, a reflection or a waterfall. According to Shiff, 'Doig consciously allows the qualities of paint to overrule the logical requirements of representation, indulging his curiosity as to what paints and

⁸⁴ Catherine Grenier and Paula Van der Bosch, *Charley's Space*, (Bonnetanten Museum, Maastricht, Netherlands; Carré d'Art Musée d'Art Contemporain de Nîmes, France; Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany, 2003), p. 30.

⁸⁵ Harold Bloom, *Essayists and Prophets* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishing, 2005), p. 141.

⁸⁶ Pater, 'Conclusion', p. 234.

⁸⁷ The analogies to current tendencies in art writing and scholarship have already appeared at various points but are further developed in the section below entitled 'Pater and contemporary scholarship'.

solvents can do' where experiment, happenstance and 'chance' preside.⁸⁸

The physically worn and weathered surfaces of his canvas have a similar effect. They, in turn, are reminiscent of Pater's 'accidents of the mind' and chance encounters between art and nature, the man-made and the elemental, or to his rusting iron and ripening corn. They result in the evocation of a patina of time. Doig has cited many anecdotes in which his work has been accidentally yet fortuitously 'damaged'. Of *Man Dressed as Bat* (Private Collection, 2007) (fig. 20) he describes the long process by which this painting reached its current state. 'A lot of the actual marks on it came from *natural causes*. Rain coming into my studio! Some of those marks were there before I started, and then I kind of allowed the painting to get wet during the making as well', he says.⁸⁹ Described in such a way the quality of the painted surface bears a resemblance to that of skin, ageing, scarred and wrinkled, as if the forces and experiences of time can be traced on the face of the canvas.

Doig's painterly quirks are what Shiff describes as 'incidents'. In some instances they resemble incidental marks that take place through other image making processes from which Doig paints: lens flare in photographs, shadowy areas of a photocopy, uneven home printing. The visual quirks connect us both to the world and to other art by other artists. They are suggested in the particular character of a brush mark, the flick of loose pigment, but finally these resonances find traction only in the particularity of the mind of each viewer. The sky in *Gasthof Zur Muldentalsperre* (fig. 7) displays a jostling of colour washes. They remind me of the traces of sea water 'tides' where salt residue remains on leather shoes after a walk on the beach, and range in colours from blue to lime green, white to purple tinges. There is a sense of the depiction of sky seen through or on another surface. It recalls, again, the mirror image in Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (fig. 19) where the crowds of the bar are represented through their reflection on the mirror behind the bar-girl. Manet's painted surface looks worn away in parts, suggesting the patina of a mirror, the representation of a representation and a link I also made in relation to the skin of water in Doig's *Window Pane*.

⁸⁸ Shiff, 'Incidents', in *Peter Doig*, Judith Nesbitt ed. (London: Tate, 2008), p. 22 and 26.

⁸⁹ My emphasis quoting Doig, *Tate Shots*, 12 (2008) <http://channel.tate.org.uk/tateshots-blog/2008/03/07/issue-12/> [accessed 1 July 2009].

According to Iser, Pater's work also turns on chance: 'The aesthetic way of life is dependent on what emerges in the constant flux of time' he writes, 'and to shut oneself off from the working of chance is to shut oneself off from life itself. Thus the aesthetic attitude is opposed to any notion of a finalised reality – it thrives on possibilities'.⁹⁰ Iser, however, also accuses Pater of exploiting 'randomness of experience and the subjectivity of perception' to increase 'the diversified chain of impressions, the fashioning of which takes us further and further away from the picture itself, and deeper and deeper into Pater's own imagination'.⁹¹ The associations that Pater brings to art are thus deemed extraneous.

Wai Chee Dimock frames the potential problem of prioritising association – which is to some extent governed by chance in that associations are made according to particular experiences through life and scholarship – quite differently. In support of her study of James, Tóibín, and Yeats, who on the surface appear at odds, she describes networks that allow her to bring the writers into orbit. Her linking of Tóibín and James is described as 'a multiple symptomatic field, a case of infectious hosting and being hosted'. Her linking of James and Yeats is, instead, founded on 'a localized field energized by the altered dynamics among genres and by their reversed ordering'. We need not pick apart exactly what Dimock means by this but the point, as far as my study is concerned, is that by,

attending to both these networks – as equal probabilities distributively scattered, not linearly entailed, and not hierarchically ranked either – literary history might be more easily conceived as a nonsovereign field, with site-specific input generating a variable morphology, a variable ordering principle, so that what appears primary in one locale can indeed lapse into secondariness in another. There are many host environments here, differently assembled, differently oriented, with different directional vectors at play. They are nontrivial mediators, and that is the point.⁹²

⁹⁰ In Doig, these possibilities could be said to manifest in the form of his clusters. See 'Some Ways: Clustering' above. Iser, *The Aesthetic Moment*, pp. 31–2.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹² Dimock, 'Weak Theory', p. 738.

Dimock's lexicon in this extract turns on a host of indeterminate states, on terminology that relates to relationships of proximity and distance, interrelation and distribution that resonate with the concerns threaded throughout my thesis. She speaks not of purposeful or causal, or even coherent, historical and cultural connections but of 'mediators', a 'variable morphology'; of 'scattered' 'probabilities'; of a 'lapse' and a 'symptomatic field'.

Elizabeth Prettejohn's argument when drawing transhistorical links between Greek and Modernist sculpture also eschews teleological notions of influence or purpose. To do so Prettejohn draws on the metaphor, not of a chain but of the "chance encounter" where 'chance' does not imply inconsequentiality. On the contrary it offers the possibility of a precision and rigour that would be unattainable at a higher level of generalisation'.⁹³ This thesis harnesses these similarly non-sovereign and non-generalisable qualities of serendipity, personal response, confluence and association. Since Doig and Pater, as we have seen, both employ chance as a mediating force for generating visual and verbal forms or ideas, their embrace of the non-causal, uncertain and disordered force of chance – hitherto largely presumed weak qualities in scholarship – goes some way to explaining why they appear here, in a thesis that turns on subjectivity, a research methodology that is, in effect, non-methodological.

Pater and contemporary scholarship

The Conclusion's embrace of serendipity does not just come about because of its avowal of allegiance to aestheticism. This chapter also reads it as a transhistorical proposition – as Pater's freeing of art critical and historical scholarship from 'the narrative of anteriority' as Bal would put it.⁹⁴ Many of the sentiments propounded in Pater's essay align closely with those of a growing number of contemporary scholars who are concerned with deep time, such as Dimock, Edouard Glissant and Siegfried Zielinski. Similar resonances also connect Pater's work to tendencies to see time as non-teleological and, sometimes anachronistically, is used by scholars like Prettejohn,

⁹³ Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture*, p. 36.

⁹⁴ Bal, *Louise Bourgeois's Spider*, p. 32. As Charles Martindale also does in 'Reception – A New Humanism? Receptivity, Pedagogy, the Transhistorical', *Classical Reception Journal*, 5(2) (2013) available at <https://doi-org.bris.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/crj/cls003> [accessed, 3 January 2018].

Alexander Nagel, Christopher S. Wood and Amy Knight Powell, and Robert Zwijnenberg, who are intent on resuscitating non-chronological interconnections in the humanities.⁹⁵

The capacity for Pater's writing to transcend the time-frame of its making has long been recognised. Prettejohn puts the growth of Paterian scholarship down to a 'postmodernist' enthusiasm for intertextuality'.⁹⁶ And as early as 1974, Harold Bloom explicitly described Pater as a 'valued precursor of Post-Modernism'.⁹⁷ I want to focus on the degrees to which Pater's text might speak to or alongside these approaches, registering the effect of history, rather than thinking of him as anything like a precursor to contemporary scholarship. Even more pressing is the importance of Prettejohn's commitment to reading Pater's essays across media, as works of art in their own right; 'not only [as] explorations of the theory of Aestheticism', she writes, 'but also [as] examples of its practice, comparable in a rigorous way to the poems of Rossetti or Morris and the paintings of Whistler or Burne-Jones'.⁹⁸ Reading art criticism or history in this way, as art practices in their own right, is, of course, one of the distinguishing features of this thesis.

But Pater's Conclusion can also be read against the backdrop of scholarship since the start of the millennium which foregrounded embodied and material, as opposed to cerebral and primarily optical, research methods.⁹⁹ This follows a relatively barren period in which the role of the body was rarely taken into account in the work of art history. Scholarship that did address the body of the viewer or art historian was most notably evidenced by the work of Michael Fried, Richard Shiff and, at least in her early

⁹⁵ Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture*; Nagel, *Medieval Modern*; Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*; Powell, *Depositions*; Zwijnenberg, 'Picasso and Rembrandt: An Anachronistic Approach', in *Subjectivity and Methodology*.

⁹⁶ Prettejohn, 'Walter Pater and Aestheticism', in *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England*, Elizabeth Prettejohn ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 37.

⁹⁷ Harold Bloom ed., *Selected Writings of Walter Pater* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. xxxi. For other examples of Pater's reception see R.M. Seiler ed., *Walter Pater; The Critical Heritage*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

⁹⁸ Prettejohn, *After the Pre-Raphaelites*, p. 36.

⁹⁹ Further discussed in chapter 1 in relation to poetic art histories.

work, Rosalind Krauss.¹⁰⁰ Since the turn of the century, however, the field has been far more thoroughly explored by such varied scholars as Mieke Bal, Dana Arnold, Margaret Iversen, Claire Farago, Robert Zwijnenberg, Stephen Melville, Michael Ann Holly, Amanda Boetzkes, Margaretha Rossholm Lagerlöf and Dan Karlholm. These have all made concerted efforts to resuscitate the value of scholarship that challenges the dichotomy between the work of the sensing body and the thinking mind.¹⁰¹ This heightened interest in the bodily address informs the increase of interest in practice-based research, too, as seen in the work of Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson, and James Elkins.¹⁰² But it also learns from the examples and possibilities of arts that centre on the body, performance and installation as theorised by scholars like Irit Rogoff, Peggy Phelan, Claire Bishop and Robert Hobbs.¹⁰³ But Pater's 'Conclusion' too, written at the end of the nineteenth century, is rendered in the kind of active and embodied language that directly relates to this recent turn in scholarship.

As Pater compares the experiences of the inward (cerebral and emotional) and outer (physical) worlds, he does so not to highlight their separation but rather their connection to the world, the degree to which the remit of our sensing bodies is not limited to our physical forms but slips into the world around us. The physical world is referred to by Pater as active, rather than static and objectified; it is a series of 'intervals' in 'perpetual

¹⁰⁰ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Richard Shiff, 'Constructing Physicality', *Art Journal*, 50(1) (1991); Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Richard Serra, a Translation', in *Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1986). Phenomenology in the visual arts is discussed by Paul Crowther in *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (Even the Frame)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹⁰¹ Bal, *Louise Bourgeois's Spider*; Dana Arnold ed., *Art History*; Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen eds. *Art and Thought* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Farago and Zwijnenberg, *Compelling Visuality*; Stephen Melville, *The Lure of the Object* (Williamstown Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005); Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson, *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); Lagerlöf and Karlholm eds., *Subjectivity and Methodology*; Erin O' Connor, 'The Centripetal Force of Expression: Drawing Embodied Histories into Glassblowing', *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 3(3) (2007).

¹⁰² Biggs and Karlsson, *The Routledge Companion*; James Elkins, *Artists with PhDs: Debates About the New Studio Art Doctoral Degree*, <http://www.academia.edu/168372Artists_with_PhDs_On_the_New_Doctoral_Degree_in_Studio_Art_opening>; also Arnold ed., *Contemporary Perspectives on Method* (2010); and Holly and Smith eds., *What Is Research in the Visual Arts?* (2008).

¹⁰³ Irit Rogoff, 'Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture', in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, Gavin Butt ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); Claire Bishop, *Participation* (London and Massachusetts: MIT press, 2006); Robert Hobbs, 'Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology and Installation Art', in *Installations Mattress Factory 1990–1999*, Claudia Giannini ed. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001).

movement', 'the passage of blood, the waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain under every ray of light and sound'. But what stands out is that Pater sees these as the 'action of [...] forces [that] extends beyond us', that is 'broadcast, driven by many currents' in wide ranging 'combinations'.¹⁰⁴ The way in which we register and intuitively reorder our experiences of the physical world is just 'a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass out beyond it' and the 'concurrence, renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting'.¹⁰⁵ This is not just a question of style. Pater is crucially connecting physical and cerebral assimilations of experience in ways that feel decidedly contemporary.

Dimock's writing chimes closely, and unconsciously I suspect, with Pater. In literary history and theory she explores the trails of 'loosely strung-together relational threads that spread sideways, with spin-offs propagated horizontally, along associative planes, rather than through linear ordering or through vertical lines of entailment'. Likewise, Pater's forces and threads extend 'beyond' and are 'broadcast'. In another instance Dimock describes 'networks' – equivalent to Pater's webs – of 'equal probabilities distributively scattered'.¹⁰⁶ Her approach sets the scene for a consideration of the arts in modes that are un-contained, non-hierarchical, non-causal, non-linear and off-centre in much the same way as I would contextualise my contribution.

But that is not to say that Dimock and Pater's (or my own) expression of an alternative is carried out in the negative. Quite the opposite. Their similarities grow as both thinkers play with the imagery of the elemental, of accrual that heightens and expands. Compare Dimock's argument for a watery 'leakiness' in her theorising of literature, which results in something 'scattered, chaotic, contextually vacillating',¹⁰⁷ with the effects of Paterian experience and 'the race of the midstream, a drift of momentary acts'.¹⁰⁸ Both concentrate on the fluidity of thought over the solidity of an idea. They

¹⁰⁴ Pater, 'Conclusion', p. 234.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 234.

¹⁰⁶ Dimock, 'Weak Theory', p. 737.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p. 736–8.

¹⁰⁸ Pater, 'Conclusion', p. 234.

favour ‘blurriness’¹⁰⁹ and ‘a tremulous wisp’ or ‘impressions [...] flickering’ over clarity.¹¹⁰ In both, thought is described as flowing and ‘live’ rather than still, stable or past; as active and metamorphosing; as if in ‘passage’ for Pater or ‘unfolding’ for Dimock.¹¹¹ Pater speaks of ‘vital forces’,¹¹² Dimock, of ‘life forces’.¹¹³ For one, these are ‘inconsistent’, for the other they generate ‘variable morphology’.¹¹⁴

It is not just their specific choice of words that convey the spirit of their scholarship, however. In Pater, it reveals itself as much in the rhythm and feel of whole sentences as in the content of singular words or phrases. Denis Donoghue sees evidence of the unfolding nature of Pater’s thought and writing ‘in every qualifying phrase,’ Pater ‘postpones conclusion’ revealing ‘the labor that went into [his work’s] production’.¹¹⁵ This stylistic tendency often obscures Pater’s primary concern, hijacking the forward momentum of argumentation. His many critics are certainly not agreed on the crux of his Conclusion. For Kate Hext it is a matter of individualism, and not of art. According to Lee McKay Johnson it is concerned with symbolism; for Barolsky it turns on evocation rather than description; whereas for Cairns Craig, it is a study in style and stream of consciousness.¹¹⁶

Carolyn Williams provides perhaps the most analytical study of Pater, elements of which pertain to the overarching theme of this thesis too. For her, following Wollheim, the Conclusion is a performance of two parts.¹¹⁷ Its highly figurative opening sees the assimilation of ‘the most dangerous “modern thought” of [Pater’s] day’ – ‘relativism,

¹⁰⁹ Dimock, ‘Weak Theory’, p. 751.

¹¹⁰ Pater, ‘Conclusion’, p. 235.

¹¹¹ Dimock, ‘Weak Theory’, p. 749.

¹¹² Pater, ‘Conclusion’, p. 236.

¹¹³ Dimock, ‘Weak Theory’, p. 749.

¹¹⁴ First quote is Pater, ‘Conclusion’, p. 235. Second quote is Dimock, ‘Weak Theory’, p. 738.

¹¹⁵ Denis Donoghue, *Walter Pater. Lover of Strange Souls* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 133.

¹¹⁶ Kate Hext, *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 6; Lee McKay Johnson, *The Metaphor of Painting: Essays on Baudelaire, Ruskin, Proust, and Pater* (Ann Arbor: University MicroFilms International Research Press, 1980), p. 193; Barolsky, *Walter Pater’s Renaissance*, p. 28; Craig, *Associationism*, p. 243.

¹¹⁷ Richard Wollheim, ‘Walter Pater as Critic of the Arts’, in *On Art and the Mind* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 161–164.

subjectivism, nihilism and hedonism’ – while the rest of the essay is a ‘disowning [of] the train of thought represented’ and in this way a staging of the “‘passage and dissolution” of mind, body, soul, self, and text’.¹¹⁸ This argument is at odds with the majority of Pater scholarship, and open to challenge. The change of tone, for example, that Williams identifies after the first two paragraphs is less clearly defined than she suggests. Though certainly Pater’s writing style tends to cool after this point, the thread of its underlying sentiment continues. Indeed, the importance of the intuitive process of getting to know one’s subject matter through experience and writing continues: ‘With this sense of the splendour of our experience [...] gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be forever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions’.¹¹⁹ Perhaps we might get further if we liken the Conclusion in structure to the literary trope of opening a novel *in medias res* in which the sensation of a particular experience or event is painted so fully as to submerge the reader in it before she has a chance to get her bearings. With time, though, as the narrator stands back, the scene becomes clearer. A similar structure has governed each section of the current thesis too, opening as they do with sustained descriptions of the effect of particular paintings.

For some scholars, regardless of the precise theoretical basis of the Conclusion, the incoherence of its philosophical discussion is deeply problematic. Even Hext, who is intent on taking Pater’s philosophy of individuality seriously, concedes that ‘the nature of his thought is idiosyncratic: shifting [...and...] apparently contradictory’.¹²⁰ How, for example, can you separate the inner and outer world of experience? How can we ‘fix upon’ the external world and its ‘more exquisite intervals’ when every experience ‘is ringed around [...] by a thick wall of personality through which no voice has ever pierced’? And even then experience is reduced to impressions which ‘are in perpetual

¹¹⁸ Williams, *Transfigured World*, pp. 12–13. Interestingly, in the context of this thesis, Williams calls this a ‘form of ventriloquism’. See chapter 2 for further discussion of ventriloquism. But whether or not Pater himself wholly believes his own performance is not a primary concern here. I am not, after all, attempting a characterisation of his aestheticism based on the ‘Conclusion’, rather, I am comparing its figurative performance to Doig’s and my own.

¹¹⁹ Pater, ‘Conclusion’, p. 237.

¹²⁰ Angela Leighton accuses Pater of being, ‘good at memorable nonsense’, in ‘Pater’s Music’, *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 14 (2005), p. 67. Referenced in Hext, *Walter Pater*, p. 6.

flight'. Pater's argument just does not, as they say, hold water.¹²¹ And yet critics are at pains to identify a coherence in Pater's work that according to Gabriel Roberts just does not exist. Interestingly Roberts turns to Sontag to argue this point. He writes: 'The literariness of Pater's writing (whether in its vast imaginative scope or its studied indeterminacy of phrasing) gets lost in the pursuit of meaning, system, and theory. The teleological pursuit of expressible meanings has resulted in unwarranted exegesis, critics too often guilty of what Sontag termed (in a remarkably Paterian essay) 'the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them'''.¹²²

We saw a charge of incoherence levelled at Sontag in chapter 2 too. But a detour to Michel de Montaigne helps iron out the discomfort that Sontag and Pater's inconsistencies might elicit. For Montaigne, 'there is no constant existence'. Our understanding of things in the world is but 'obscure appearance and shadow, a weak and uncertain opinion of itself: and if perhaps you fix your thought to apprehend its being; it would be but like grasping water'.¹²³ Pater's inconsistencies might then be conceived as demonstrations of the flux of existence; the existence of beings and objects, of selves and others, as not constant but always in the middle, in the midst, a confluence caught in the process. In this scenario, we can begin to see Pater's text as embracing its own incoherence, offering us a version of experience that is closer to, even documents, the felt nature of experience itself.¹²⁴ At which point the text's inherent uncertainties, often characterised as Pater's weakness, seem to abate.¹²⁵ Or rather, following Dimock, it

¹²¹ I use this phrase about the argument holding water quite deliberately for reasons that will become clearer as the theme of water emerges. See Inman, 'The Intellectual Contexts for Pater's 'Conclusion'' for the 'central inconsistency' of Pater's argument, p. 13.

¹²² Referencing Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, p. 5. Roberts, however, goes on to castigate Pater's critics for their 'misconstrual [...] of what Pater actually *meant* in his essays'. Excavating what Pater actually 'meant', were that even possible, is not something that concerns me here and in fact represents its own misreading of Sontag's 'Against Interpretation' to which Roberts refers, as I have already made plain in chapter 2. Though Roberts's other focus, on 'the artistry with which [Pater's] essays were composed', is of strong interest to me. See Gabriel Roberts, "'Analysis leaves off': The Use and Abuse of Philosophy in Walter Pater's *Renaissance*", *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 37(4) (2008), 407–425, p. 409.

¹²³ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works of Michel de Montaigne*, William Hazlitt trans. (London: John Templeman, 1842), p. 281.

¹²⁴ I will come back to the way in which this thesis can be argued as being documentary in 'End Matters'.

¹²⁵ See Carolyn Williams on Pater's 'two metaphorical systems that are in many ways incommensurate' and his reference to 'contradictory figures for the incoherence of the material world' as well as the 'contradictory figures for the impossibility of knowing', in Williams *Transfigured World*, p. 17. See also Meisel, *The Absent Father*, p. 114.

allows us to recast ‘weakness’ in theory – in this case incoherence – as not lesser, but rather non-sovereign.

Iser comes to a similar conclusion in his accounting for the presence of inconsistencies, or accidents as I presented them earlier, in Pater’s text. The ‘Conclusion’s driving force’, he writes, is to ‘capture the evanescence of the aesthetic’.¹²⁶ Given that ‘aestheticism is not an ordered phenomenon’, the passage represents a direct enactment of this, and sees Pater shunning those supposedly desirable qualities of art writing – coherence, consistency and lucidity. So rather than see Pater as ‘good at memorable nonsense’,¹²⁷ his work might more astutely be considered in line with Maria Fusco’s call for a transformative art writing which ‘depicts resistance or perhaps more exactly a sly challenge to comprehension’, which highlights ‘the essential obscurity of the image’.¹²⁸ In other words, we might reframe the accusations of Pater’s incoherence, and the purpose of his incoherence otherwise: its unsystematic structural quality enacts the difficulty of its research methods, a (non-) methodology that, in spirit at least, is close to my own.

Closing with water

Though not exactly incoherent, the narrative of Doig’s paintings is ambiguous and the quality and texture through the application of paint variable. As visual references are merged, rather than collaged, across his painted surface, they often converge across a span of water. Water as an evocation of the passage of time, as equivalent to the process of looking and thinking about the past and about painting, is shared by both Doig and Pater. In this chapter, the effect of water serves, simultaneously, as an active metaphor for the interconnected nature of art writing too. It is not just that water induces (and produces) reflection(s) but that the movement of water evokes the intuitive nature of thinking and writing. The analogy goes further, since the porous connections between bodies of water, between rivers and lakes, seas and oceans are – like creative practices – physically unbounded and constantly shifting. So to mirror water’s morphology in

¹²⁶ Iser, *The Aesthetic Moment*, p. 5.

¹²⁷ Leighton, ‘Pater’s Music’, p. 67.

¹²⁸ Fusco, ‘Say who I am’, p. 2.

words is to be buoyed by it and sometimes drowned by it and sometimes seemingly absorbed into it. It recalls the manner in which I opened this chapter, positing that ‘visual images might absorb written words as written words might absorb visual images’ where the distinction between object and subject, writing and painting, thinking and feeling, past and present merge. Thus I have not treated Pater and Doig systematically, one after the other; instead my words and analogies float around them, surfacing and resurfacing: they are taken up one by one, carried for a time and then released; themes are picked up and then dropped and then folded back into the chapter, to return, at a later point, wave-like.

The physical substance of water has been fundamental. Water’s transparency and its ability sometimes to appear to absorb, at others to throw light back, allows for the various modulations of reflection that I have been exploring in so doing, echoing the fluidity of Doig’s visual and Pater’s textual language. The sorts of imagery to which Pater refers in his Conclusion is, as we have seen, often natural and often water-based. He speaks of water flooding, flowing, whirling, pooling, racing or drifting. When referring to ‘the outer world’ he describes ‘the delicious recoil from the flood of water in summer heat’ and ‘the movement of the shore-side, where the water flows down indeed, though in apparent rest’.¹²⁹ When referring to ‘the inner world’, by contrast, he speaks of ‘the race of the mid-stream, a drift of momentary acts of sight and passion and thought’ and of ‘experience [that] seems to bury us under a flood of external objects’ or ‘a tremulous wisp constantly re-forming itself on the stream.’¹³⁰ But the rhythm of Pater’s text also echoes the rhythm of a running stream, building momentum, echoing the sensation of accumulative experiences which are not clearly organised into self contained pithy sentences. They are nothing like Sontag’s or even Stein’s words to which I will soon turn. Pater’s words abound with commas, a fitting structural analogy to the interflow and interconnectedness of the experiences on which he dwells. His sentence (non-)structures evoke the ‘forces’ of ‘concurrence’ of which he speaks, which are ‘renewed from moment to moment [...] parting sooner or later on their ways’.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Pater, ‘Conclusion’, p. 234.

¹³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 236.

¹³¹ Pater, ‘Conclusion’, p. 234.

It is telling how often commentators on Doig's work turn to images of water to recreate the sensation of his paintings in words. Hartley relates them to condensation.¹³² Eva Myer-Hermann sees *Daytime Astronomy* as, 'like a close-up of a wet window-pane, a screen of reflective droplets that resolve the visible world into atoms, so that we cannot look through it for a motif. We see the glistening of the raindrops, the slow downward movement of the water.'¹³³ Water figures in Doig's paintings variously in the form of a still sea, lagoon, swamp, puddle or pond. It is sometimes frozen as snow and ice or, less frequently, it is depicted in flow as a river, waterfall or lapping tide. But it also figures through the medium of his painting itself that ranges from free-flowing liquidity to slow moving viscosity. It is worth reminding ourselves of Doig's painting technique which is akin to picking a path between allowing paint to behave fluidly in washes and allowing it its tacky, malleable, and controllable consistency. His paintings, thus, embody the variation of rhythms of water's movement and states, ranging from gushing waterfalls to trickling rivulets, from stagnant ponds to pearlescent expanses of snow and ice.

Pelican (Stag) (Michael Werner Gallery, 2003) (fig. 21) and *Pelican* (Private Collection, 2004) (fig. 22) exemplify the distinct, and sometimes contradictory, nature of water's propulsion and containment. This is a modulated distinction which also lies at the heart of the analogy between Pater and Doig's work. The pelican paintings are versions of the same scene and both depict water and paint as flowing and still.¹³⁴ *Pelican*, in which a man stands at the still shores of an otherwise unpeopled tropical lagoon, appears to pulsate all over as if in the unsure process of becoming, either being exposed or washed away in a flood. It evokes the feeling of Pater's 'momentary drift', as if the sensation of this strange moment in which the head of a dead pelican is dragged through the shallows were being forgotten even as it is recorded, 'gone while we try to apprehend it', Pater might say.¹³⁵ *Pelican Stag*, on the other hand, is far more assertive with its deeper hues and well-defined outline of trees and figure. And yet the stasis bestowed by

¹³² Eva Myer-Hermann, 'On Daytime Astronomy', in *Peter Doig: Blizzard Seventy-Seven*, Terry R. Myers and Eva Meyer-Hermann contr. (Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Nuremberg; Kunsthalle zu Kiel, Germany; Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1998), p. 129; Hartley, 'Visual Intelligence', p. 64.

¹³³ Myer-Hermann, 'On Daytime Astronomy', p. 130.

¹³⁴ See Shiff, 'Incidents', pp. 36–37. And Hartley, 'Visual Intelligence', pp. 118–123.

¹³⁵ Pater, 'Conclusion', p. 188.

the figurative representation is undermined by the blue waterfall that appears behind the figure, which in material terms references movement, running water. Hartley conjectures that, in *Pelican (Stag)*, ‘having a piercingly realistic, photographically derived figure next to a passage of paint that is emphatically, materially real was not contradictory or antithetical. The two forms of realism could be mutually reinforcing’.¹³⁶ This mix of qualities and degrees of realism weaves between detailed mimetic representation of a figure and abstraction of the drenched wash of pale blue. It can be read as analogous to the veering between form and content that is going on here, in my words, between the substance of water and its representation, between art writing as fictional and art writing as a means of documenting encounters. Taking the two pelican paintings together, and following Pater’s lead by separating (to a limited degree) inner and outer worlds, Doig sways between two seemingly contradictory modes: the combination of paint washing and flooding the canvas on the one hand and its precise control, on the other and therefore conveys the reality of the fictionalised landscape on the one hand and the reality of the site of paint on canvas on the other.

‘Our place knows us no more’

It is this multiplicity of confluences, of realities and fictions, of phenomenal and artistic matter that allows for the emergence of a particular variety of bodily thought. The ‘matter’ of thought has come up repeatedly through this chapter and it is important to make clear that my use of the term does not clash with my broader emphasis on the importance of the experience of encounters with words and images through research. Rather, it is my thesis that the probing of these intuitive experiential encounters gives rise to thought processes that offer a specific and subtle perceptual level of understanding, one that can otherwise get buried under the weight of more measurable research methodologies.

So when referring to terms like association, concurrence, or the process of bringing work, considered separate, into correspondence across disciplines, I have attempted to crystallise the nature of that connection through my choice of words. The type of association I have been suggesting between Doig’s paintings and Pater’s words is a

¹³⁶ Hartley, ‘Visual Intelligence’, p. 122.

further step towards understanding what specific qualities of the works elicit particular confluences and also towards understanding how the study of that confluence might be productive. This is not a matter of following a chain of direct reactions nor is it meant to resemble a patchwork of disparate elements pieced and threaded together to form a whole. Rather this chapter should be considered a space in which the spectrum of types of association are flecked with nuance and necessary variation, to which the works under discussion themselves give rise. This is reflected in the build-up of impressions that pull my text in different directions resulting in a chapter that neither coheres in an absolute or systematic way, nor entirely loses sight of its wholeness.

Iser characterises Pater's work as 'a meeting-place for poetic, critical, scientific and philosophic concepts which intermingle in defiance of the conventional ideas of genres and disciplines'.¹³⁷ Prettejohn takes this a step further, as if roused by Pater's tendency to create trans-historical art criticism. 'Abandon our silos' she calls to scholars, to historians of ancient and modern art, and to artists.¹³⁸ Rather than allow ourselves to be limited by our learning, by the particular vocabulary and dominant ideologies of our disciplines, not least by the tendency to bind our consideration of art to the contexts in which it first appeared as new, Prettejohn proposes a shake up:

In the absence of any theory for how artistic relationships might work vertically through history, common-sense chronology comes to the fore, and any later reference of an earlier art-form is bound to seem conservative, while any relationship of an earlier art-form to a later one will seem simply irrelevant to the earlier one.¹³⁹

In that vein this chapter has borne witness to my merging of Pater's words with Doig's images of water and drifting and doubles. In this scenario Pater's words, Doig's paintings and my research are not solid, ordered and separate. Neither are they entirely

¹³⁷ Iser, *The Aesthetic Moment*, p. 1. And Inman, 'The Intellectual Contexts for Pater's 'Conclusion'', pp. 182–192; see Harold Bloom on Pater's 'strange achievement [to have] assimilated Wordsworth to Lucretius', in *Selected Writings of Walter Pater* (1974), p. xv; see Donald Hill's critical notes in which he finds specific echoes of the writing and thinking of Descartes, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, Kant, Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer, Shakespeare, Goethe, Novalis and Victor Hugo among others, in Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry, The 1893 Text*, Donald L. Hill ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 454–457.

¹³⁸ Prettejohn, *The Modernity of Ancient Sculpture*, p. 256.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 247.

dissolved, and certainly not resolved. But through my handling of them, their convergence is, I hope, fostered, even allowed to partially congeal, as they slide in and out of focus. This allows for a liquefaction of the distinction between the agents, between historical periods, and also between self and other, near and far, margin and centre, fiction and reality.

My metabolising of Pater and Doig's verbal and visual imagery is, therefore, intended to form something, like water, close to a 'compound'. In compounds two or more atoms bond forming a distinct substance.¹⁴⁰ It has been associations that have allowed these bonds to form between bodies, borrowing from the nature of associations that Cairns Craig characterises as an operation of the imagination allowing for 'a chaos of strange attractors'.¹⁴¹ Or further like Picasso's relating of poetry and painting by assonance. Gaston Bachelard's distinction between resonance and reverberation also plays its part below the surface, through his emphasis on the fluidity of both terms. 'In the resonance', he writes, 'we hear the poem, in the reverberation we speak it, it is our own'.¹⁴² Or perhaps my identifying of a hitherto non-existent relationship between Doig and Pater might be more accurately described as what Martin Heidegger termed an 'attunement', or Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 'synchronization' or 'symbiosis'.¹⁴³ All of these terms chime with a process with which I have been grappling, and all share – despite the disparateness of their origination – a sensitivity to, and acceptance of, the amorphousness of association.

To that end this chapter has enacted a tracing of the imaginative points of contact revealed when aligning Doig's paintings, Pater's, Susan Manning's and Wai Chee Dimock's words and my speculations, in order to suggest a model of art writing and

¹⁴⁰ See Craig, *Associationism*, p. 14 on the 'chemical (not mechanical) metaphors' employed by Hume in *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, L. A. Selby-Bigge ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 19.

¹⁴¹ Craig, *Associationism*, p. 11.

¹⁴² Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. xxii.

¹⁴³ Martin Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit* in *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson trans. (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1978), p. 176. *Befindlichkeit* is generally translated as attunement. And Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, D. A. Landes trans. and ed. (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), see p. 251 for 'synchronization' and see p. 370 for 'symbiosis'. Clearly *Befindlichkeit*, synchronization and symbiosis have different nuances but they all share a common sense of correspondence between and absorption or merging of the inner and outer worlds.

with it art thinking. Likewise, that the sensation of the perfect confluence of words, images and ideas has never quite been reached testifies to its status as in-progress. In the forming of thoughts others are unraveled, in the weaving of words others stray, in looking upon one image others pale. But rather than characterise these inevitable effects as a weakness, we might instead recognise these ‘hanging threads and out-of-focus blurriness [as] the life forces in a non-sovereign field’ as Dimock, again, put it.¹⁴⁴

Much of this chapter, and indeed thesis, has been an attempt to form a variable verbal equivalence to the physical sensation of apprehending imagery and text in time. This sensation appears in various modes, which might sometimes appear either stylistically weak or contradictory. Mixed metaphors have, therefore, interrupted the coherence of descriptions and ideas on these pages, ‘associations are sparked, conjunctions bud and analogies grow’, I write. Seemingly oxymoronic terms like ‘bodily thought’ are paired. I shift to and fro between past, present, future, conditional and subjunctive tenses. But such friction-filled passages are tolerated because they are evidence of the immediacy of thoughts in progress, a theme that underlies this whole thesis. But they also appear as a means to make manifest, through the texture of language, non-systematic methods of thought. This inclusion of stylistically ‘incorrect’ forms leads us back to Manning again, and her study of ‘the rules of grammar’ as markers of power. She critiques the tendency for the sovereignty of Scottish idiomatic language to be undermined by the law of grammar which ‘provides boundaries to contain uncertainty, rules to protect speakers and writers from falling on the sword of their own expression’.¹⁴⁵

This chapter has already fallen

Water has often worked as a metaphor to metabolise Doig and Pater and Manning and Dimock and others into the form of the text itself, to settle upon a form of writing that resonates with the sensation of my subjectively inflected attempts to apprehend – by which I mean at once capture and understand – in writing. Water is within us; we contain it, we need it, we excrete it. But it is also without us; it surrounds us, envelops

¹⁴⁴ Dimock, ‘Weak Theory’, p. 749.

¹⁴⁵ Manning, *Fragments of Union*, p. 243. It also points towards Dimock’s arguments in support of ‘weakness’ in theory discussed in chapter 1.

us, its surface tension allows us to float upon it but a heavy mass of water can also drown us. But how do we take stock of a substance so fluid and amorphous?

How do we find an equivalence for the sensation of its movement and effect upon us in words? Despite its potential dangers, in a large and forceful mass, water can also invigorate us. When waves unroll upon us and over us, in forms that are similar though never exactly the same, their repetitive action either slowly accrues or depletes depending on which way the tide is turning. The action plays out in the manner of a recurring regeneration of and turn to thoughts and ideas. That is to say, water is the carrier of sensation, a rising energy from which thoughts issue. And just as we cannot distinguish water from wave so we cannot distinguish sensation from thought. Reflections, meanwhile, force us to take a step back, separating us from the feel of water, off which we observe reflections bounce. Reflections force a slowing down, a sense of self-awareness, which enables us to view ourselves viewing, or to view our paintings being painted, our words being written or our *thought thinking*.

That is a curious phrase – thought thinking – one which activates the process of thinking and the emergence of thought in productive ways. Perhaps, in the context of this thesis, we can extend it to the other activities specified above. Do the themes or metaphors of water and reflection allow us to view ‘paintings painting’, or ‘writing writing’? Thought thinking, though, is not my own, or rather not in these specific terms, though it figured in my earlier introduction of Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile.¹⁴⁶ But it seems to me no coincidence that the gerund more effectively embodies acts in the process of unfolding, like this thesis being left to rise.¹⁴⁷ The gerund enacts the continuous movement – in leaps, falls and sideways shuffles – that the process of creative thinking and writing entails. Like the site of rolling tides that finally unfurl along an area of familiar landscape that is neither sea nor land but a confluence of the two. A shoreline is

¹⁴⁶ See Haddock and Wakefield eds., *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*, essays by Gentile trans. Lizzie Lloyd and James Wakefield (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2015).

¹⁴⁷ See various texts on the continuous present especially, Jerome McGann, *The Point is to Change It. Poetry and Criticism in the Continuous Present* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007) who claims that ‘Thinking, not knowledge, is the object of criticism’ and emphasises the emergence of thought in which ‘thinking always comes in that kind of continuing, ephemeral present’, pp. xix–xx.

never contained, never absolute, never complete and certainly never graspable, not really a line at all. Along it, or in it or through it land and sea, solids and liquids, bleed.

Words such as submerge, absorb, condense, resurface, wave, and rise, embody the connections I am making along the way, which are also driven by the character of the writing as it unfolds. Word follows word, and is generated by the peculiar character of a text or an image or the passage between the two. Impressions (Pater might call them) materialise, swept along by the meeting places of forms and threads. As analogies materialise, certainties are shed and currents cross. This meandering trajectory is propelled not by the desire for a specific point of arrival, but by a sense that, due to the nature of the interception of particular points of departure, something might happen along the way.

Chapter 4

Thinking Through:

Michael Simpson and Gertrude Stein

A poem should be equal to: Not true.

[...]

A poem should not mean, But be.¹

Archibald MacLeish

¹ Archibald MacLeish, 'Ars Poetica', in *Collected Poems 1917-1982* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), p. 106.

Beginnings: This is the beginning

Something about Michael Simpson's paintings feels analogous to Gertrude Stein's writing; something in Stein's writing resonates with Simpson's paintings. I have the feeling that their work is associative, that they can be annexed with a conjunctive 'and' – Stein and Simpson; Simpson and Stein. This chapter interrogates that feeling. Sometimes their conjunction here will merge, becoming Simpson as Stein or Stein as Simpson, closely aligning, even overlapping. At others their connection is comparative: Stein like Simpson, Simpson like Stein.

This chapter takes a wide-angle view. Though it looks at particular instances of and details in the work of Stein and Simpson, it does not look at single works in isolation. In fact, sometimes its leaps between a variety of elements in a variety of works may appear vertiginous. This is intentional and in some senses enacts the idea that I am pursuing, in which ideas are arrived at simultaneously, or occur to us in snatched disjointed moments and whose arrival on the tip of our tongues cannot be readily traced. These moments occur, in my mind, as will become clearer, as analogous to Simpson's inconstant rendering of perspectival fields or Stein's skewed compression and elongation of conventional tenses. In all these cases the ground beneath the viewer or reader's feet slips.

This chapter distinguishes itself from the previous ones in a variety of ways. This is partly due to how their coupling first suggested itself to me. My interest in evolved from more contact with the artist than I would ever usually seek out in my research. Unlike through my freelance work as an art writer, which often necessitates studio visits, conversations and interviews with artists, I have, until now, avoided direct contact with artists for the purposes of my doctoral research in an effort to allow myself to look 'freely', to allow a network of (relatively) unbound associations to issue from my felt engagement with Zurbarán or Doig's paintings.² In the case of Simpson, however, my encounter with his work (as opposed to their reproduction in books or online) began one bitterly cold January morning in 2016 in his carefully organised studio, a converted barn

² Clearly no looking is ever wholly 'free' or unbound but in the case of both Doig and Zurbarán I sought not to read about their work before looking at it for myself.

in the small rural town of Bradford-on-Avon, with the artist by my side. Here paintings lay part-painted, or stacked up against walls. In the adjoining kitchenette was a six foot cork-board where, as I remember, postcards and images of works by Vermeer, Zurbarán and many others were pinned (I should really have documented all of this at the time but I our conversation took over). My viewing of the works inevitably felt, therefore, to some extent circumscribed by Simpson's own account of his working methods, his contextualisation of his works within the canon of contemporary art and art history and by his perspective on his paintings' meaning and aesthetic effect. I came to know his oeuvre better over the three month span of his exhibition at Spike Island, Bristol – a large converted tea packing factory with high ceilings, perfectly meeting the proportions of Simpson's paintings, that is a mere 15 minutes walk from my home and therefore allowed my frequent solitary visits.

There are other crucial differences, aside from the context of my encounter with Simpson's work and my subsequent pairing of Simpson and Stein, that characterise this chapter. It not only draws out specific effects and themes and ways by which writing and painting appear to speak to each other and to me but Simpson and Stein's similarities are further drawn out by my observation and comparison of their treatment by critics. The kinds of themes, cultural analogies, mannerisms, and moods that the reception of their work picks out often aligns in interesting, and sometimes surprisingly close, ways. By pulling on the thread of these instances this chapter does not seek to unravel Stein and Simpson's considerable differences, however. It is, rather, another means of exploring the analogy that I have already intuited between them and to wonder how that analogy stacks up against the observations made by their critics also. It is, I suppose, to trace the connective points of Donald Davidson's theory of triangulation.³ If, this chapter says, I have thought these paintings and these texts appear in a relationship of analogy, why might that be? What is it about these works that leads me to this intuition? And if some of the characteristics that I see them sharing are also identified and explored by others then perhaps my ahistorical, acausal connection might not seem so far fetched.

³ Discussed in chapter 1 of this thesis.

But a good deal of what is to come turns on how the form of the chapter itself best demonstrates the *feeling* of analogy between Stein and Simpson. As with much intuitive thinking the form that this feeling takes is rather nebulous. In this case, it appears as a series of frieze frames, like slow motion blinking in which text and image merge and then shift, momentarily, and then align, and then again. To list the specific instances of this effect seems reductive – how could a list, a mere list, communicate the subtlety of the image’s and text’s compulsion, their haunting, their challenge. And yet there’s something about the list that also feels quite apt here. It might look like this:

This is the beginning
This is a beginning (of sorts)
This is beginning again, by juxtaposition
‘Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series’
‘It was all so nearly alike it must be different’
In their repeating something else emerges
‘Can I repeat it’: Essaying (lists)
Mechanically
Metaphysically
Systematically
Continuously
Historically
Sensually
(Non) sensically
Conclusion in progress: ‘Making what is seen as it is seen’

Another way, partially delivered at a conference at University of East Anglia, is to perform my pairing of Stein and Simpson in the form of, what I called, a ‘Presentation as Explanation’, a contaminated take on Stein’s 1925 ‘Composition as Explanation’. Taking to the podium in 2016, without introduction, pre-recorded excerpts of Stein (read by me) played out over a slow moving slide show of a selection of un-captioned images of Simpson’s paintings. The enactment of this idea through visual and aural simultaneity conveys the important sense of my holding Simpson and Stein together, ‘nextily’ as Stein would have it.⁴ The idea of the relationship that I am proposing was thus made manifest in the form of its presentation. I imagine this playing, on a loop, alongside your reading of this text which, as it goes, will start to pull together some of the critical threads that reach out and between and towards Stein and Simpson.

And so. For example:

⁴ Stein, ‘In the Grass (On Spain)’, *Geography and Plays*, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33403/33403-8.txt> [accessed 12 July 2018].

/

A black ladder
Tilted against a worn-out wall.⁵

/

An impractically slim ladder
Tilted at a few degrees against a not-quite blank wall.

/

A robust ladder
Tilted at even fewer degrees against a less worn wall.

/

A leaner ladder
Tilted at a few more degrees against a frayed edged wall.

/ / / /

All topped by four small black squares
Like dots on lower case 'i's

. . . .

Some rungs catch lines of light:
Ladder shadows / shadow ladders / sadder ladows
Sweep the wall and the floor,
Italicising,
(One way and another).

[i] [i] [i] [i]

The passage above performs a kind of textual assimilation of a sustained encounter with one of Michael Simpson's paintings: *Leper Squint (16)* (Tate, London, 2014) (fig. 23). It constitutes the kind of 'writing-through' a piece of visual art, examples of which appear throughout this thesis. In each case they function as a means of making manifest the process of getting-to-know the images in question, from, as it were, the inside: embodying them and literally embedding them in my thesis. They are forms of 'poetic imagining' – to use Michael Oakeshott's phrase introduced in the opening to this thesis – which usher in further thought and conversation around the images.

Beginnings: This is a beginning (of sorts)

Of Simpson's work, I could begin by telling you where and when it was made, and how long it took. I could hitch it to a number of theoretical discussions on the role of painting or religion in contemporary art. I could describe the artist's religious

upbringing by his mother, a Jewish émigré. I could link his work to Stein's by means of their shared Jewish roots, and their positions as outsiders through most of their careers. Simpson exhibited little during the 1970s, and only sporadically from the 1980s onwards until his exhibition at Spike Island, Bristol in 2016 which generated renewed interest in his work. During this exhibition, entitled 'Flat Surface Painting', his *Squint (19)* (Walker Art Collection, Liverpool, 2015) won the John Moores Painting Prize. His work has since been bought by major national and international collections, and he is now represented by Blain Southern. Likewise Stein's work remained unread until *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) and her work remains widely and openly criticised: T. S. Eliot has said of her work 'It is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one's mind'; Wyndham Lewis likens her style of writing to a 'cold black suet-pudding'; and Elaine Showalter describes it as 'unreadable'.⁶

In connecting Simpson and Stein, I could, alternatively, call upon their works' relationship to Cubism. There is abundant scholarship on Stein's associations with cubism. Mabel Dodge's article in *Art and Decoration*, for example, published reproductions of Picasso's paintings alongside Stein's textual portraits (first published in *Camera Work*, 1912) of Picasso and Matisse.⁷ Indeed, the link between Stein and Cubism has proven enduring and is further discussed by scholars such as L. T. Fitz, Randa Dubnick, and Henry Sayre.⁸ From here I could look to the Cubist sensibilities that are present in Simpson's work too through his playful approaches to illusionism and realism, combining text and imagery, exaggerated articulations of perspective and light. The case has been made repeatedly that Italian art of the early Renaissance is an important precursor to Cubism. F. and S. Borsi pinpoint Paolo Uccello as the forefather

⁶ T. S. Eliot's remark is referenced in Elizabeth Hardwick, *The Collected Essays of Elizabeth Hardwick*, selected by Darryl Pinckney (New York: New York Review Books, 2017), p. 392; Wyndham Lewis referenced in Hardwick, *The Collected Essays*, p. 399; Elaine Showalter calls Stein a 'self-promoter, endlessly self-important. And I just think that her work is unreadable – absolutely unreadable', in <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/literary-landmarks-a-history-of-american-women-writers-56536736/#IKQmBVfspoWRKe7u.99> [accessed 14 November 2017].

⁷ Referenced in Linda Marie Voris, 'Along the Spreading Surface: The Sequence of Gertrude Stein's Compositional Tasks in the 1920s' (PhD Dissertation, Berkeley, 1998), p. 1.

⁸ See L. T. Fitz, 'Gertrude Stein and Picasso: The Language of Surfaces', *American Literature*, 45(2) (1973); Randa Dubnick, 'Two Types of Obscurity in the Writing of Gertrude Stein', in *Gertrude Stein Advanced: An Anthology of Criticism*, Richard Kostelanetz ed. (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland and Company Press, 1990), p. 64; and Henry Sayre, 'The Artist's Model: American Art and the Question of Looking like Gertrude Stein', in *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), pp. 24 and 26.

of cubist modernism.⁹ Jaś Elsner identifies the self-consciousness of modern and contemporary art as first arising during the Renaissance and post-Renaissance.¹⁰ And Christine Poggi's relates Apollinaire's interest in the illusionistic devices exhibited in Carlo Crivelli's painting from the fifteenth century. In this Apollinaire makes an explicit link between Crivelli and Picasso and Braque's interest in the interchange between the real and the illusory.¹¹ I could pivot on this last observation since Simpson's work has often been brought into association with the depiction of space in Crivelli's work too, in particular through a number of group exhibitions curated by David Risley (Simpson's then gallerist) such as 'Crivelli's Nail' (Chapter Gallery, Cardiff, 2000) and 'On the Immense and the Numberless' (David Risley Gallery, Copenhagen, 2016).¹² We could go further to note that Crivelli's exaggerated depictions of architectural spaces, quasi illusionist rendering of decorative symbolic objects, and incorporation of text within his images are all a strong presence in Simpson's work too.

I could, but I will not, because this is not how the pairing first suggested itself. In fact, this series of connections only emerged after close observation and writing through of the mutual resonances of Simpson and Stein's work. The current chapter, then, is a proposition, precipitated by a hunch, that the resonances identified might find even greater and more specific congruence by my writing through the proposition. I use the term congruence to denote at once Simpson and Stein's differences and compatibilities. The relationship that plays out below is one of at times juxtaposition, at others mirroring; sometimes it is like an awkward conversation between unwilling dinner guests.

⁹ F. and S. Borsi, *Paolo Uccello* (Paris: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 140.

¹⁰ Jaś Elsner, 'Style', in *Critical Terms for Art History*, pp. 106–107.

¹¹ Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 172.

¹² Simpson's work was included in both 'Crivelli's Nail' at Chapter Gallery, Cardiff (2000), see <https://www.chapter.org/crivellis-nail> [last accessed 20 September, 2018] and 'On the Immense and the Numberless' at David Risley Gallery, Copenhagen (2016), see <http://www.davidrisleygallery.com/exhibitions/on-the-immense-and-the-numberless> [last accessed 20 September, 2018].

Beginnings: This is beginning again, by juxtaposition

My attunement of Stein and Simpson, here, stems from my simultaneous exposure to his paintings, her words, my thesis writing and my freelance work and practice. What is at stake in this pairing is subtly different from, for example, Zurbarán and Sontag. In my first chapter the connection between the work of a painter and a writer grows from their intrinsic analogies; Sontag allows us a way to empathise with Zurbarán's approach and sensitivity to pictorial construction and Zurbarán allows us to empathise with Sontag's textual structure and style, in a way that other methodologies of investigation do not. The writing of their relationship brings to the surface unpredictable aesthetic, structural and formal similarities which Zurbarán and Sontag's apparent temporal, geographic, political, social disparities might otherwise belie.

Here, my underlying claim is that the work of Simpson and Stein is intrinsically, though also perhaps not obviously, attuned. This claim is founded on two overlapping though distinct scholarly values: One posits that the understanding of remote texts and artworks might be expanded when read in mutual conjunction; the second holds juxtaposition as a methodology by which to investigate art and writing. The force of both values actively impacts this chapter.

In some respects, however, the work of Simpson and Stein seems quite opposed. Compare: Simpson's ostensive and self imposed frugality with regard to subject matter – ladders, confessionals, benches, leper squints – with Stein's range of topics that include composition, grammar, repetition, the domestic, and paintings. Frugality in Stein comes in the form of her restricted lexicon: pronoun and adverb heavy, adjective and noun light. One of her *Fourteen Anonymous Portraits* (1923) begins:

He will find out.
She will find out
He will find out.¹³

Her 'Business in Baltimore' comprises only simple, unsophisticated words like: 'and', 'yes', 'better', 'more', and 'most'. They are barely punctuated. Compare Simpson's

¹³ Stein, 'Fourteen Anonymous Portraits', in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 194.

lofty and sometimes oblique references to weighty topics like religion, art, philosophy and history to Stein's frequent reference to either no ostensible subject matter or the most banal subject matter – roast beef, an umbrella, shoes. Stein too points towards more obviously 'substantial' references – elucidation, history, painting, and war – though these are nonetheless expressed through childlike repetitions that emphasise naivety and ordinariness rather than learnedness: 'The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything.'¹⁴

Tonal juxtapositions like this abound. In Stein simple phrases are adjoined, theoretically, with a full stop but their effect is one of being abutted – like underground commuters intent on not conversing – rather than developing, one following on from the next. In Simpson a ladder is pictured, usually, underneath a black square or rectangle with a void of flat painting pointedly not joining the two. In his *Leper Squint* (36) (Private Collection: Aachen, 2016) (fig. 24) semi-illusionist detailed paintwork describes a graphic shiny yellow stool that floats part way up an erect matt black ladder against a background of grey-cream paint dragged flatly and intermittently across the width of the canvas. Stein's oxymoronically titled *Tender Buttons* (1914) is full of examples whereby two adjacent sentences appear entirely unrelated: 'The change of color, is likely and a difference a very little difference is prepared. Sugar is not a vegetable'.¹⁵ It is hard to work out how the subject matter of the first sentence leads to the next. Their contrasting tone is even more pronounced. The first is halting, accruing gradually and unsurely. The comma placed after 'color' is another hindrance, an obstacle over which we stumble. The second sentence, by contrast, is simple and assured. The stop that divides them feels like a chasm renting them apart, its delicate appearance on the page not full enough to do justice to the difference it bridges. These qualities of disparity see thoughts leap from one thing to another, in various stages of resolution, repetition and insistence.

¹⁴ Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 215.

¹⁵ Stein, 'Tender Buttons', in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 126.

Frequent contrasts in scale also contribute to the spirit of juxtaposition. Compare Simpson's *Bench Painting 77* (Schürmann Collection: Aachen, Germany, 2009) which measures 245 cm high and 518 cm wide to vertical *Squint 4* (Private Collection Denmark, 2013–2014), modest by comparison, at 152 x 119 cm or even to his *Squint 56* (Private Collection, Berlin, 2015–2017) which measures just 46 x 30 cm. Likewise, compare the mammoth 1000 page continuous prose of Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1911) to *Tender Buttons* which is broken up into small sections, some of which comprise just a handful of words. Sometimes Stein's scales vary in a given piece. *An Elucidation* swings between verbose multi-clausal sentences to one word contractions, formatted list-like:

‘Able
Idle.
There are four words in all.
There
Why
There
Why
There
Able
Idle.’¹⁶

Perhaps my points here would be more clearly conveyed had I formatted the previous three paragraphs in columns, the comparisons made ever more pronounced, literally juxtaposed on the page. But, more to the point, where are these mounting juxtapositions leading us?

In 1871, Arthur Rimbaud wrote that, ‘It is wrong to say: I think. One should say: I am thought’.¹⁷ This kind of thought and its means of communication is bound by uncertain juxtaposition. One reading of ‘I am thought’ points to an inevitability, as if someone outside of myself has thought *of* me, has conjured me in their thoughts; in this proposition the self is somehow fated, final. Another reading might focus on the passivity of the expression, someone else has thought me. Still another, sees Rimbaud's

¹⁶ Stein, ‘An Elucidation’, in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 432. I have left Stein's original formatting intact to emphasis the contrast between modes.

¹⁷ Arthur Rimbaud in a letter to Georges Izambard dated 13 May 1887, referenced in *Reading Duncan Reading: Robert Duncan and the Poetics of Derivation*, Stephen Collis and Graham Lyons eds. (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2012), p. 112.

words as summoning a kind of thought that is not a thing we possess, control or present but something that we do, a process by which we are. In this case the self is enacted by and inextricably linked to the nature of its specific thoughts. The spirit of this second reading underpins this chapter. Simpson's paintings do not resemble illustrations of thoughts he has had, but are visual iterations of thought itself, that occur again and again, with and through his work. Put like this, it feels comparable with Stein who makes 'writing as it is made', which is 'not there [as in finished], it is going to be there and we are here'.¹⁸ And so 'it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this is what makes what is seen as it is.'¹⁹ This chapter also values making 'what is seen as it is'. Its form and expression find themselves rendering a kind of thought process that is suggested from the work itself: repetitive and sustained, specific and precise, speculative and dissatisfied, and ultimately unresolved. These thoughts built up in modified layers of sometimes gradual and sometimes forceful accretions. To modify Rimbaud's aphorism for the context of this thesis I might say: It is wrong to say: I am thought. One should say: I am thought thinking thoughts, where 'I' is the writing writing not the writer who has written.²⁰

Beginnings: 'Beginning again and again is a natural thing even when there is a series'

A beginning:
an intake of breath, a margin.

(Signpost) Intent.

In the beginning we say what we're about to say.
We say it.
Then we say we've said it.

What about,
saying what we're about to say while saying it?

Beginnings loom large in Stein and Simpson's work. They often, in fact, appear not to move beyond beginnings, never arriving at an end, just another beginning. Simpson's

¹⁸ Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 498.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 500.

²⁰ This phrasing also recalls Giovanni Gentile's 'thought thinking' expounded on in chapter 1.

pared back paintings are inhabited by the rudimentary suggestion of a possible setting, objects either set within, underpinned by or otherwise located alongside architectural frameworks. They are the beginnings of certainly uncertain places. But before allowing you any sense of assurance of their specificity he stops and starts over. He does this obsessively, restricting his work to the representation of a very few objects over a period of, often, decades. Even then he is not satisfied: of his Bench series, which lasted twenty years and produced more than eighty paintings, he tells how ‘Part of me still wants to start all over again’.²¹ And even when they are finished they are always left suspended in an air of uncertainty. The unfinished, patchy painterly quality hints that in fact this is still just the beginning.

Steinian beginnings pepper this chapter as asides, in between, and subheadings. Hers are of a different order. Her beginnings fleck her work throughout. Partway through *The Making of Americans* she will cut out with ‘To begin again with the children’, which is modified at the beginning of the next paragraph with ‘To begin again then with children’ and again a page later ‘[To begin again then with loving repeating in children.]’. A few pages later she begins a paragraph with ‘To begin again’. A page or so later she starts another paragraph with ‘This is then a beginning of the way of knowing everything in everyone’, followed shortly by: ‘There are so many ways of beginning this description’.²² Later, in ‘Composition as Explanation’, ‘beginning again’, and sometimes again, occurs mantra-like, fifteen times over fewer than six pages and halts the text’s development but also functions, as Stein herself says, as a way of ‘groping for a continuous present’.²³ Her beginnings, like Simpson’s, feel fraught with difficulty, uncomfortable in their bald repetitive persistence but also symptomatic of the unseen process of creative thinking.

Repetitions: ‘It was all so nearly alike it must be different’

²¹ Michael Simpson, ‘Dexter Dalwood in Conversation with Michael Simpson’, in ‘Study #6. Michael Simpson’, David Roberts Art Foundation (2014), no page numbers. Available at <http://davidrobertsartfoundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/STUDY-FINAL.pdf> [accessed 1 July 2018].

²² Stein, ‘The Making of Americans’, in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., pp. 62–67.

²³ Stein, ‘Compositions as Explanation’, in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 499.

*Bench Painting (31)*²⁴

244cm x 427.5 cm

Bench: black, cage mesh.

Floor: grey, roughed up. Intermittent shadow of bench.

Wall: white, roughed up.

Top right: Insectocutor.

*Bench Painting (42)*²⁵

244 cm x 534 cm

Bench: black, cage mesh (bolder this time).

Floor: dark grey with group of pecking pigeons. No shadow of bench.

Wall: white, roughed-up brick. Pink rectangle overlaid.

*Bench Painting (50)*²⁶

238 cm x 520 cm

Bench: black, cage mesh (tighter this time).

Floor: Blue-grey. Clean shadow of bench.

Wall: Pristine white brick.

*Bench Painting (63)*²⁷

236 cm x 517 cm

Bench: black, cage mesh (thinner). Small yellow identification tag: 63.

Floor: No distinction between floor and wall. Pale grey-yellow. No shadow of bench. Shadow of hovering grille.

Wall: No distinction between floor and wall. Pale grey-yellow.

Top right: Hovering chunky grey grille.

*Bench Painting (64)*²⁸

243 cm x 518 cm

Bench: black, cage mesh (thin). Small more orangey identification tag: 64.

Floor: No distinction between floor and wall. Slightly darker pale grey. No shadow of bench. Shadow of grille.

Wall: No distinction between floor and wall. Slightly darker pale grey.

Top right: Hovering chunky black grille, pivots open.

This inventory, of sorts, presents a selection of Simpson's Bench series which numbers over 78. Over its twenty year period, between 1989 and 2009, the basic structure and key elements of the work in the series are repeated. The format is always landscape, and large (between two and a half metres tall and four to five wide). The central bench

²⁴ (Private Collection, 1993–1995) (fig. 25).

²⁵ (Control Techniques The Arup Building, 1994–1995) (fig. 26).

²⁶ (David Roberts Foundation Collection, 1996–1998) (fig. 27).

²⁷ (Location unknown, 2006) (fig. 28).

²⁸ (Location unknown, 2006) (fig. 29).

stretches across most of the length of the paintings. The floor may or may not include a shadow. There is always some kind of wall or nondescript plane behind it. An object also appears either under, hovering above, over, or behind the bench. This combination of elements remains relatively constant, yet individual varieties emerge, drawing attention to the differences that these shifts affect on the whole. No two paintings are ever exactly the same (how could they be) but they are often startlingly alike. Their systematic, list-like, presentation on the page above is deliberate. It communicates, or better *enacts* – to recall a term I used often in chapter 2 in reference to the phrase ‘These. Are. Some. Pots.’ in relation to Zurbarán – a sense of the paintings’ own method, tone and systematicity.²⁹

In an interview between Simpson and the painter Dexter Dalwood, Dalwood describes the quality of Simpson’s repetition as like ‘a control experiment. What will come out of just keeping this thing going. It’s a bit like a joke that’s been told so many times that it becomes a threat. Because of the weight of all the pre-existing paintings that relate to this one, it becomes more than what it is’.³⁰ What that ‘more’ is is a matter of contention. If, as I have already posited, we see Simpson’s paintings as embodiments of a proposition or thesis, then with each iteration the thought appears to gradually mutate, suggesting something that, like Stein’s ‘continuous present’, is ongoing. Indeed, Simpson’s long term interest in the renegade Italian philosopher and monk, Giordano Bruno, might vouch for this claim. Bruno once said ‘to think is to speculate with images’.³¹

Simpson’s repetition – or what he often, in fact, describes as ‘persistence’ or ‘insistence’ – forms the backbone of his later series too.³² Pictorial elements like ladders and leper

²⁹ See Section 1 in chapter 2 entitled ‘Thinking *Still Life with Four Vessels*’. The inventory also nods to a Steinian approach to writing, though this was not a conscious decision and likely came about in part because of my exposure to Stein’s writing at the time of thinking about Simpson’s paintings.

³⁰ Dalwood, ‘Study #6: Michael Simpson’ (2014), no page numbers.

³¹ Roderic Harris, ‘To think is to speculate’, *Turps Banana*, 3 (2007), p. 52. Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 369, from Aristotle, *De anima*, 431 a, 17. In an important way this thesis proposes that ‘to think is to speculate with [texts and] images’. See further discussion in my Conclusion.

³² Simpson says, ‘I like stubborn. I like persistence and insistence’, in Simpson, ‘Study #6: Michael Simpson’, no page numbers.

squints, minbars, and confessionals appear over and over again (see figs. 21–22, 23–27, and 33). The Leper Squint series dates from around 2011 and totals over 60 in number (though some have been destroyed or painted over by Simpson). As with the Bench series the Squints comprise few pictorial elements. The canvas is divided up between floors, walls or ambiguous planes, ladders and steps, shadows and an additional object: a stool, a cage, a grille or painted words. Some combination of these appear in endless variation that range from the slight to the extreme. Their ubiquity might point towards a reading of their religious, cultural and historical symbolism. Ladders, leper squints, Minbars, and confessionals might be read as symbols of means to separate, limit or control movement. A leper squint or hagioscope, for example, is an opening in an internal church wall. Directed at an oblique angle to allow for a view of the altar, it allowed lepers and other people with potentially contagious diseases to take part in services while separating them from the rest of the congregation. A Minbar is a pulpit arrived at by a series of steps from which the Imam addresses the congregation in a mosque: a symbol of authority. And the confessional is often portrayed as the method by which the Catholic church latently presides over (or controls) its congregants. A ladder might similarly be used as a metaphorical symbol to facilitate, or give the appearance of facilitating, human movement to a higher spiritual realm.³³

Ladders, for example, are embroiled in a whole series of religious parables. They are strongly associated with Christ's ascent and descent from the cross, with Jacob's ladder dreamt as a means to reach heaven, or with the Mi'raj which tells how the Islamic prophet Muhammad ascends to heaven. In philosophy the ladder calls to mind Plato's allegory of the cave, long read as a metaphor for escaping from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge. Or in Wittgenstein's handling, the ladder functions as a method for attaining knowledge. In all these cases, and to various degrees, ladders are a means to arrive at self improvement. A logical reading of the Simpson paintings, then, might attempt to find meaning in the forms represented; they are painted with such assurance, authority, forthrightness. That which is depicted must, we assume, be important. But in Simpson's treatment of them, if they are supposed to allow us to see

³³ A good account of these kinds of metaphorical readings of both the squints and the benches is discussed in Martin Herbert, 'Michael Simpson: 'It's Compulsive!'', *Art Review* (September 2017).

more, he ensures we do not: We see nothing through his squints, save a mute black square; his confessionals are empty; his pivoted ladders unclimbable.

Stein's repetitions are sometimes even more explicit, transposing whole passages of one text into another.³⁴ More frequently she repeats words, phrases or sentence structures: 'Now repeat it. Can I repeat it. I can repeat it. As I repeat it, as I repeat it, they and they do, do and do do, do and do too, do and do do'.³⁵ The rhythms of the sounds of syllables are stacked up, echoed. They appear in such close proximity, always slightly reordered, which occasion their distortion. The simplest words like 'do', for example, become queered through reiteration. Their position in the sentence shuttles between functioning as signifier and as a more abstract demonstration of the felt nature of close but inexact repetition.

Stein also plays on more indirect ideas of repetition, such as when her text is built to form a resemblance of the subject that she is writing about. Her portraits, for example, are intended to convey the impression of – embodying rather than describing – their subjects. She describes this process in terms of 'the difficulty of putting down the complete conception that I had of an individual, the complete rhythm of a personality that I had gradually acquired through listening seeing feeling experience'.³⁶ Despite her recognition of the gradual accrual of the personality of her sitter, their apprehension on her pages, she thought, should convey a sense of the immediacy and simultaneity of her experience of that person.³⁷ So, through her much studied portrait of Picasso, itself a repetition of sorts, she intones: 'Exact resemblance to exact resemblance the exact resemblance as exact as a resemblance, exactly as resembling, exactly resembling,

³⁴ This is particularly the focus of Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978). See also Ulla E. Dydo who identifies whole passages that have been transcribed from one Stein text to another in 'echoes in words and phrases that reappear, never by accident, across the years', in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 280.

³⁵ Stein, 'Business in Baltimore', in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 200.

³⁶ Stein, *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Hill, 1957), p. 147.

³⁷ Voris, 'Along the Spreading Surface', p. 12.

exactly in resemblance exactly a resemblance, exactly and resemblance.’³⁸ Her repetitions, it should be noted, are never absolute, their resemblances shift, adjusting and reproducing. According to Linda Voris, their modulation builds up the sense of a ‘homogenous surface’ through which difference always nudges its way though, leading her to investigate ‘the working of difference in the apparent context of sameness’.³⁹

Retallack identifies repetitive patterns emerging from Stein’s repetitions too which, on the page and in the mind, resemble wallpaper. Retallack appears to agree with William Gass that Stein’s ‘use of repetition is not about saying something again’. It subverts the meaning attached, by association, to words, in favour of a build up of sounds, rhythms and sensations. In Retallack’s words this is ‘the embodiment of what [Stein] calls ‘her ‘continuous present’ – successive words or phrases reconfiguring what precedes them through repetition and variation’.⁴⁰ It is not, then, the repetition of particular words that we should pay attention to, but the experience of a particular ordering of a particular set of words. According to Gass, whose early understanding of Stein is worth quoting at length, Stein ‘set out to render’ repetition:

Almost at once she realised that language itself is a complete analogue of experience because it [...] is made of a large but finite number of relatively fixed terms which are then allowed to occur in a limited number of clearly specified relation, so that it is not the appearance of a word that matters but the manner of its reappearance.⁴¹

Much like in Simpson’s work it is not the specificity of the objects that we should pay attention to but the manner of their presentation and re-presentation, over and over, in variations that are subtly alike and different. Gass compares Stein’s project to the repetitions inherent in our life experiences (the repetitive punctuation of an alarm clock,

³⁸ Retallack, *Selections*, p. 190. Voris’s discussion of the repetition and how it relates to Stein’s epistemology is particularly intriguing, in ‘Along the Spreading Surface’, p. 8–9. Her readings of Wendy Steiner on resemblance and representation as well as Henry Sayre on ‘re-presenting representation’ are particularly useful, see Steiner, *Exact Resemblance* and Sayre, *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*, p. 24.

³⁹ Linda Marie Voris, *The Composition of Sense in Gertrude Stein’s Landscape Writing* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 125 and 38.

⁴⁰ Retallack, *Selections*, p. 43.

⁴¹ William Gass, ‘Introduction’, in Stein, *The Geographical History of America or The Relation of Human Mind* (New York: Vintage, 1973), pp. 24–25.

letters being pushed through a letterbox, tea breaks, school runs). Here repetitions accumulate, combining to form an analogue of a particular way of going about writing, and, if Voris's understanding of Stein and my claim for Simpson are correct, of elucidating thought.

But the usual uses of repetition – to emphasise, persuade, illuminate, remind – seem no longer relevant given that both Stein and Simpson use it to extremes. It functions to dissolve rather than foreground meaning and shroud their work in a veil of obscurity rather than lucidity. Repetition is one of the subheadings by which C. Namwali Serpell organises her *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (2014), a study of degrees of uncertainty in modern and contemporary fiction. She identifies a pattern of 'extreme' repetition used to destabilise, to 'trouble our sense of reality' rather than shore it up.⁴² Serpell picks out Stein's poetry for its manipulation of 'repetition at the linguistic level to convey both the rhythms of quotidian speech and what linguists call *semantic saturation* or *semantic satiation*: the way a word will become meaningless if it is repeated enough times.'⁴³ This kind of use of repetition to nullify has been much exploited in art: think of Bruce Nauman's audio pieces for 'Raw Materials' (Tate Modern, 2014) with their pestering repetition of 'Work work work work' or Morandi's innumerable still life paintings of pots and bottles. I am not, therefore, suggesting that either Stein or Simpson are unique in their extensive use of repetition, only that it is one of many points of contact that warrant their relationship of congruence.

So if, as I am suggesting following Serpell, Stein's deployment of repetition functions to disintegrate the semantics usually associated with a particular ordering of words, could the result of Simpson's use of recurrent imagery be comparable? In both the ritual of repetition comes to the fore. The recital of words as if of a prayer or a sermon intoned in unison, spoken over and over again. Repetitions are used as refrains. But to what end? Or, better, what are its implications?

⁴² C. Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 190.

⁴³ Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*, p. 192.

As the opening ‘inventory’ to this section sought to reveal our repeated exposure to the basic format of a large landscape painting of a bench, alongside only a few other elements, has a rather surprising effect: the associational possibilities of these elements grow. Simpson himself writes of the bench’s ‘associations of confinement, alienation, restraint and industrial death [...as] a place where justice and injustice are administered’⁴⁴ but he has also spoken to me about its associations with Samuel Beckett’s *Come and Go* in which all the action of this play takes place on a bench or *Waiting for Godot* in which Vladimir and Estragon spend the entire play waiting for Godot, who never arrives.⁴⁵ As they wait the two protagonists engage in a series of wide-ranging discussions encountering other unanticipated characters instead. The limitations imposed by repetition therefore actually lead to an opening out of imaginative freedom and variety by association. They become meaning-full, rather than less.

Simpson, however, characterises his repetition as persistence, a distinction that is worth noting.⁴⁶ There is a neutrality and instantaneousness to the term repetition which might account for Simpson’s avoidance of it. Repetition has also become a commonplace descriptor, one inextricably knotted with movements like pop or minimalism. It connotes the recurrence of an object or action in an attempt to recreate a, knowingly inexact, copy. Persistence instead conjures a sense of great effort being exerted, a determination to try something again and again, to make something new and, implicitly at least, better. Not only that, persistence speaks of a strength of character, of an extreme resolve to succeed at something often in the face of difficult circumstances.

A comparable distinction is drawn by Stein around the question of what she terms ‘necessary repetition’ which she defines by separating repetition from insistence. Of insistence she says, ‘its emphasis can never be repeating, because insistence is always alive and if it is alive it is never saying anything in the same way because emphasis can

⁴⁴ Simpson, ‘Preface’, in *Hymn. Psalm. Song. Prayer. Bench Paintings* (The Barn and the Old Gasworks, 2005), no page numbers.

⁴⁵ A film of Beckett’s *Come and Go* was in fact shown alongside an exhibition of Simpson’s work at David Roberts Art Foundation, 2014, referenced in A. R. Price, ‘On the Leper Squint Paintings of Michael Simpson’, *Journal of Contemporary Painting*, 4(2) (2018), 249–265.

⁴⁶ Simpson, Simpson and Dalwood in Conversation, ‘Study #6: Michael Simpson’, no page numbers.

never be the same even when it is most the same'.⁴⁷ Here the distinction seems to turn on a difference in tone. Repetition for Stein seems to invoke the possibility of a stable, neutral, even monotone expression. But this is a fiction. When something is repeated it is expressed again and 'expressing any thing there can be no repetition because the essence of expression is insistence' in contrast to insistence which is characterised as an imposition, a desperation to compel or control a situation outside of ourselves.⁴⁸ Insistence is flecked with emphases that are variable and emotional, its overtone erratic and potentially turbulent. She goes as far as to say that she is '*inclined to believe* there is no such thing as repetition' which is not the same as saying there is no such thing as repetition.⁴⁹

But another purpose of repetition is to remember, navigate, respond to and (to some extent) make sense of the world and our experiences. Siri Hustvedt, after Søren Kierkegaard, sees repetition not as a matter of more-of-the-same but rather as an iteration of 'something new'. By seeing memory itself as repetition Hustvedt sees it as a bridging between pasts, presents and futures. My metaphor here, however, is not quite right since Hustvedt also insists on a conception of time that is not 'horizontal' but 'vertical'.⁵⁰ It is founded on an understanding of the now as 'retaining, anticipatory phenomenological present' which gets to the nub of how Stein and Simpson deploy repetition too.⁵¹

Here Hustvedt relies heavily on Merleau-Ponty's notions of vertical time as embodied; Merleau-Ponty dissolves Cartesian distinctions between our minds and our bodies, ourselves and the world around us, conceiving of time and perception as enveloped as well as enveloping. There are many ways to articulate this bodily engagement. We

⁴⁷ Stein, 'Portraits and Repetition', in *Lectures in America*, p. 171.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 166. My emphases.

⁵⁰ Hustvedt has strong misgivings about those art historians who 'march through linear, horizontal time with its periods and changing styles, their language colored by an almost phobic relation to the emotional, pretheoretical, vertical qualities of art viewing, a fear related to biases of agency and power and to the fact that passion and the body have been understood as effeminate and reason and the mental as manly, a dualist tradition that infects our memories, our expectations, and our perceptions', in Hustvedt, *A Woman Looking at Men*, p. 472.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 452.

might reference psychologist J. J. Gibson's term 'affordance'.⁵² We might draw on the long history of aesthetic theory on empathy from Robert Vischer to Vernon Lee.⁵³ As different as these approaches are, the language of 'affordance' or 'empathy' articulates an entwined relationship between objects and beings, between emotional responses and histories which in turn enables non-specific precognitive engagement. Hustvedt's thinking is posited on repetitions, not of specific things necessarily, but of sensations, of the suggestion of other things and is analogous to my reading of Simpson and Stein's employment of sensorial or associational repetition.

Associations are what leads the black apertures of Simpson's squints – the portals which he depicts as the channel for our supposed enlightenment – to summon Malevich's equivocal *Black Square* (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 1915). The squints hover between Malevich's black square and inversions or at least, shrunken versions, of the benches from Simpson's earlier Bench series which are in turn a nod to Stanley Kubrick's monolithic obelisk from *2001 Space Odyssey*. I can say this, regardless of whether or not Simpson was thinking of Malevich's black square when he painted his squints, because the squints register in me as a repetition of not just the colour and form of Malevich's work but the feeling that Malevich's work evokes in me – the sense of hopeful hopelessness, the sense of deceptively simple alterity, and the black humour that lies beneath its manifestation.

Repetitions: In their repeating something else emerges

Art criticism, history and writing are also predicated on a particular form of repetition. The identification of religious overtones in Simpson's reception have become somewhat over-defining due partly to the need to marry conscious and rationally conceived positions – that Simpson is a fervent atheist, for example. But the sort of compulsive repetition at play in his work suggests to me a more implicit subject matter: something like thought. His gradual accrual, folding and unfolding of key elements recalls the

⁵² J. J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston and London: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

⁵³ See, for example, Robert Vischer, *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893*, Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikonomou eds. (Santa Monica: Getty Centre for the History of Art and Humanities, University of Chicago Press, 1994); Vernon Lee, *Beauty and Ugliness* (London: John Lane, 1912).

precision of slowly formed, repetitive and sustained thinking. The structure of a thought is frequently similar to one already experienced: I recognise it as having issued from someone or something in particular – due to its tone, size, perspective and so on – though it might be differently inflected. So it is in the writing of art where echoes of the words and images and ideas of others haunt our retellings – more or less consciously. It is not necessarily the case that we are aware of our picking through the landscape of art and literature but that particular elements of art and literature show through our processes. Similarly, Simpson's paintings should not be understood as illustrations of finished thoughts but as iterations of ongoing, non-specific (as Hustvedt would have it) thought that grow with and through his paintings, unfolding through variant repetition.

Stein's oxymoronic coupling: 'Exact resemblance to exact resemblance the exact resemblance as exact as a resemblance, exactly as resembling, exactly resembling, exactly in resemblance exactly a resemblance, exactly and resemblance' also embodies this. Resemblance is only ever approximate. It is not by accident that her coupling here gives up on an interconnective conjunction, settling instead for a side by side 'exactly *and* resemblance'.⁵⁴ This spatial juxtaposition lies at the heart of Stein's project as much as Simpson's, and mine.

Repetitions: 'Can I repeat it': Essaying (lists)

The previous section began as a list detailing the contents of five paintings by Simpson. Its skeletal form of ekphrastic representation of the paintings was an attempt to convey a sense of the paintings' own inherent patterns of repetition. The format of the list felt appropriate in the context of these paintings and the subsection on repetition but it also draws out the essayistic form on which these chapters are predicated in both tone and genre, and which I explored at length in chapter 1 of the thesis.

Essays are prone to pronouncements of lists. Lists cause a sense of change in tempo and perspectival relationships introducing 'more or less violently,' as Brian Dillon puts it, 'a sudden verticality into the horizontal flow of text'.⁵⁵ Lists are repetitious though never

⁵⁴ Stein, 'If I Told Him', in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 190.

⁵⁵ Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), p. 24.

repetitive, and indicative of an obsessive, and naive, desire to control, pin down, hold on, articulate, remember, gather, grasp – surely the task of any doctoral thesis. But a list also conveys a certain melancholy mood, shared by Stein and Simpson, owing to its inevitable failure to achieve all that it essays. Simpson's ladders appear on the canvas with the verticality of a list too and are numbered chronologically according to the order of their making. The numbers are not however complete, since some works have been destroyed and, anyway, to describe the body of work as complete would suggest that Simpson has an endpoint in mind for them, which he does not.

For Stein the function of a list as enumerator or as an aid to recall is dissolved as she pushes the form to breaking point: 'I begin you begin we begin they begin. They began we began you began I began'. She goes on,

Another Example.

I think I won't
I think I will
I think I will
I think I won't.
I think I won't
I think I will
I think I will
I think I won't.⁵⁶

These indexing tendencies bestow her text with a staccato fragmentariness that focuses on rhythm and appearance on a page, rather than content, which is the purpose of most lists. Yet she approaches them with seemingly objective pragmatism: 'In this natural way of creating it then that it was simply different everything being alike it was simply different, this kept on leading one to lists. Lists naturally for a while and by lists I mean a series.'⁵⁷ Yet her intoned congregation of 'to begin' stretches out like a horizontal list – surely a throwback to days spent in a classroom learning a foreign language: 'repeat after me'. Lists stretch horizontally in the manner of a Simpson bench, as well as vertically, in the manner of a Simpson ladder. Usually they are both a symbol and a

⁵⁶ Stein, 'An Elucidation', in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 436.

⁵⁷ Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 500.

means of consolidating decisiveness and planning, yet in Stein's hands they function more as evidence of ongoing writerly indecision. These are not to-do-lists; these, like Simpson's, are doing-lists.

Adverbs: Mechanically

Part of the upshot of Stein and Simpson's deployment of repetition is that it exerts considerable pressure on the limits of their media. Their work often appears to arrive at a point at which, for example, their use of clear figurative language, narrative or historical frames of reference crystallise into obscurity either as formal or theoretical abstractions. Detailed correlations between their reception by critics at this point help draw out their aesthetic and theoretical similarities.

Simpson has oft repeated his overarching interest in the 'mechanics of painting' a phrase with undertones of 1960s American Minimalism.⁵⁸ Godfrey compares Simpson's cage benches to Sol Lewitt grids, his heavy black benches to Donald Judd boxes identifying in them not a shared seriality but 'much the same gravity and immutability'.⁵⁹ The scale of Simpson's work, its overt compositional simplicity, its restricted colour palette and subject matter, the stage-like choreography of its settings that hint at a dependence on the presence and/or absence of a real body as well as its antipathy to expressionist gesture – through extensive use of the roller – all point to the language of minimalism. All of these qualities add up to what Simpson describes as his overriding interest in the 'gospel of vertical and horizontals'.⁶⁰

Many readings of Stein's work similarly foreground the formal nature of her words as innovative writerly experiments, free from ulterior signification. Her work is 'autonomous' according to Richard Kostelantetz, revealing 'a love of the word as resonance or a shape in space' according to William Gass. And for Marianne DeKoven it is 'incoherent, open-ended, anarchic [and] irreducibly multiple' as well as

⁵⁸ Simpson, Simpson and Dalwood in Conversation, 'Study #6: Michael Simpson', no page numbers.

⁵⁹ Tony Godfrey, 'Un-named Paintings', in *Bench Paintings 1992–1995* (Bristol and Powys: Arnolfini and Oriel, 1996), no page numbers.

⁶⁰ In conversation with the artist 3 March 2016.

simultaneously ‘linear, orderly, closed, hierarchical, sensible, coherent, referential’.⁶¹ Stein’s interest in extreme repetition as well as a deliberately sparse use of punctuation – she considers commas ‘degrading’ and ‘enfeebling’, ‘writing should go on and on’⁶² – intimate a sympathy with minimalist aesthetics. Stein lets ‘nouns speak for themselves’ says Retallack. Her minimalism ‘maximised the sensual presences of matter out of which [her work] is constructed’ maximising ‘the sensual presence of forms of life that invest particular words with their energy’.⁶³ The sensual presence of even the most mundane words are suspended, often in expanses of blank page:

In circles.⁶⁴

Stein’s minimalism, however, is not straightforward. Though replete with pronouns, nouns are far scarcer. Their lack of specificity lead to a sentence like: ‘He was then understanding something and understanding any one else who was understanding something of that thing’, in which the ‘something’ and the ‘any one else’ and ‘that thing’ are never referred to concretely.⁶⁵ This makes for syntactically wrought rather than simple sentence structures but for Stein ‘complications make eventually for simplicity and therefore I have always liked dependent adverbial clauses.’⁶⁶ The paradox of this dual tendency towards complication and simplicity is drawn out by Elizabeth Hardwick who describes how Stein ‘stripped, reduced, and simplified only to add up without mercy, making her prose an intimidating heap of bones’.⁶⁷ ‘Her work,’ Hardwick

⁶¹ Richard Kostelanetz, ‘Introduction’, in *The Yale Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), xii; William Gass, ‘Gertrude Stein: Her Escape from Protective Language’, in *Fictions and Figures of Life* (New York: David R. Godine, 1970), pp. 92 and 95; Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing* (Madison Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), cited by Chessman, *The Public is Invited to Dance*, p. 10; Chessman favours what she calls a ‘dialogic reading – a reading incorporating both the body’s and the imagination’s response’ that takes into account a multiplicity of possible interpretations, see pp. 10 and 12–13.

⁶² Stein, ‘Poetry and Grammar’, in *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 215.

⁶³ Retallack, *Selections*, p. 35.

⁶⁴ Stein, ‘A Circular Play’, in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 338.

⁶⁵ Stein, ‘Making of Americans’, in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 97.

⁶⁶ Stein, ‘Poetry and Grammar’, p. 220.

⁶⁷ This reductionism is a skill that Hardwick says Hemingway learned from Stein, see Hardwick, *The Collected Essays*, p. 398.

continues, ‘unlike the resonating silences in the art of Samuel Beckett, embodies in its loquacity and verbosity the curious paradox of the minimalist form’.⁶⁸ Less in more.

In some ways her minimalism manifests more obviously, though. A breakdown of her ‘Composition as Explanation’, one of her more conventional texts, is revealing of the restrictions she imposes upon the variety of words used in a single text. Verbs figure strongly; in the 3876 word text, conjugations of the basic verbs ‘to be’, ‘to do’ and ‘to make’ feature 365 times. Pronouns and determiners are used indeterminately but also with pronounced frequency: ‘this’: 47 times; ‘that’: 107 times. ‘Thing’, including the variations ‘nothing’ and ‘something’, appears 122 times. The conjunction ‘and’ appears 192 times.⁶⁹ This restriction of word variants lends her sentences a skeletal quality.⁷⁰

Adverbs: Metaphysically

In fact this minimalist inflection leads both Stein and Simpson’s work to be regarded as either having a strongly metaphysical bent or, at the very least, being underpinned by some kind of conceptual or philosophical impulse. This effects a distancing between the visual and textual quality of non-expressive ‘objectivity’, building up a sense that we might be in the presence of higher order thinking. For Allegra Stewart the ‘experience of contemplation and creative dissociation’ leads to just such a reading of Stein’s work.⁷¹ Robert Bartlett Haas, in a tone of reverie, wonders ‘Who else has for over thirty years struggled to give our literature the backbone of a native metaphysics?’⁷² And Hardwick puts Stein’s achievement of conceptual limitlessness down to her self-imposed textual restrictions: ‘[Stein] wrote at length and with a very very small

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 403.

⁶⁹ Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder, Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 90.

⁷⁰ This method of analysing Stein’s text is borrowed from Tanya Clement, ‘The Story of One: Narrative and Composition in Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 54(3) (2012).

⁷¹ Allegra Stewart, *Gertrude Stein and the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), cited in Claudia Francken, *Gertrude Stein, Writer and Thinker* (Münster and London: LIT, 2000), p. 20.

⁷² Robert Bartlett Hass, *What Are Masterpieces* (Los Angeles: The Conference Press, 1940), p. 21, cited by Francken, *Gertrude Stein*, p. 17.

vocabulary. It was her original idea to make this vocabulary sufficient for immensities of conception'.⁷³

These immensities are communicated through the familiar and the quotidian rather than the abstruse. Thornton Wilder, in his introduction to Stein's *Narration* (1969), has a particular take on the repercussions of Stein's 'almost terrifying exactness in [her] use of the very words that the rest of the world employs loosely: everybody, everything and every way'. This, he says, leads her discussion 'into the realms of psychology, philosophy and metaphysics, to a theory of knowledge and a theory of time'. Stein, he argues, speaks of what might be interpreted as the subjective and objective but refers to these modes as 'the inside and the outside', rooting her thoughts in the language of the everyday but resulting in a surprising abstraction.⁷⁴

The philosophical resonances present in Simpson's work, however, are more grandiose. References to higher order thinking are rife: Religion or Bruno as a symbol of free intellectual thought, for example. As a result, readings of his work on these terms are recurrent. Barry Schwabsky describes Simpson's paintings as 'austere, solemn, grave' as if inherently ruminative.⁷⁵ Harris makes a direct connection between Simpson's paintings and Hermetic Art, framing the former as 'thought pictures' capable of 'intuitive insights' by means of a 'quiet but thinking presence'.⁷⁶ Simpson's inclusion in the group exhibition 'Revolt of the Sage' (Blain Southern, 2016), whose title comes from a painting of the same name by Giorgio De Chirico, is explicit. It aligns Simpson's work with the suspended, dreamlike and timeless reality of De Chirico's self-named 'metaphysical interiors'.⁷⁷ Simpson's tight foreshortening, and exaggerated and inconsistent use of perspective and shadow to compose physically impossible stages,

⁷³ Hardwick, *The Collected Essays*, p. 393.

⁷⁴ Thornton Wilder, *Narration: Four Lectures by Gertrude Stein*, Thornton Wilder intro. (New York: Greenwood Press 1969), pp. vi–vii.

⁷⁵ Barry Schwabsky, 'Michael Simpson's Bench Paintings', David Roberts Art Foundation, no page numbers.

⁷⁶ Harris, 'To think is to speculate', p. 53.

⁷⁷ See Hans Pietsch, 'Metaphysische Räume – Michael Simpson', *ART* (Das Kunstmagazin, February 2017). The connection with de Chirico and metaphysics is also made by Godfrey 'Un-named Paintings', no page numbers.

via inexpressive paint marks and cold colour tones, contribute to their pervading mood of melancholy. It is all strongly reminiscent of the work De Chirico produced during the second decade of the twentieth century.

The presence of the metaphysical, however, even in Simpson, should not be understood as solely conceptual. Its sensual, bodily effect is, in fact, fundamental. As Craig Burnett emphasises of the benches, they deal in a wholly corporeal ‘metaphysic proposition’: ‘We feel the bulk of the bench in our bodies; it measures the timbre of our limbs’.⁷⁸ This is partly, I suspect, due to the lack of actual bodies represented to us in paint: a single cherub is one instance, a rare gaggle of pigeons, another. The corporeal is not staged for us. The benches are nearly two times larger than life size which according to Godfrey’s reading, renders them ‘strangely intimate’, allowing us to ‘project intuitively our bodies into their space’.⁷⁹ This projection is compelled, but it is also precarious since the space of the paintings is so ambiguous: objects are at once weighty but also weightless, in levitation; walls and floors may or may not meet; the surface drag of rolled paint guides our eye, which our bodies inevitably follow, across the plane of the canvas rather than into it; and the frequently abraded nature of the paintings’ rim, where the uppermost layer of paint stops short of the edge, interferes with the illusion of space.⁸⁰ As a consequence, almost because Simpson places so many such obstacles in our way, we meet his paintings’ resistance with equal insistence; the potential for physical access to his scenes feels somehow inevitable.

Adverbs: Systematically

In holding back from overt aesthetic expressiveness the stylistic austerity manifest in Stein and Simpson appears aloof to the effects of subjective foible. Stein’s eschewal of adjectival flourishes or metaphor, for example, acts as the counterpart to Simpson’s emphatic spurning of what Godfrey calls ‘aesthetic confectionary’ or ‘frippery’, that is, any elements that might distract from the essence of the painting.⁸¹ Instead, both Stein

⁷⁸ Burnett, ‘The Timbre of Our Limbs’, p. 4–5.

⁷⁹ Godfrey, ‘Un-named Paintings’, no page numbers.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, no page numbers.

⁸¹ *ibid.*, no page numbers.

and Simpson appear to turn to a method of systematising that calls to mind scientific or mathematical problem solving.

In Stein, the mathematical impulse is much reflected upon. Laura Riding and Robert Graves relate how the ‘design’ of Stein’s words, their appearance in formation on the page, is ‘literally “abstract” and mathematical’. They account for this effect by her use of ‘commonplace words’ which amount to ‘mechanical and not eccentric’ utterances.⁸² They are functional rather than expansive or gestural. Retallack describes Stein’s use of grammar as structurally enacting ‘a differential geometry of attention’.⁸³ The absence of metaphor in mathematics – whether spatial (geometry) or numerical (arithmetics) – with its inherent resistance to interpretation, clearly appeals:

Are there arithmetics, irresistible, in part.
Are there arithmetics irresistible resisted a part.
Are there arithmetics irresistible apart.
Ever say ever see, as ever see, ever say.
Notably.
Arithmetics.⁸⁴

Steven Meyer builds a whole thesis around Stein’s perceived method of ‘reconfigur[ing] science *as* writing’, making claims for her ‘performing ‘scientific experiments in writing’.⁸⁵ Part way through ‘We Came. A History’, Stein’s text turns from a piece of prose organised into reasonably conventional paragraphs to a body of text on a page with no paragraph breaks in which sentences or clauses, often without verbs, are linked by equals signs: ‘History is made and remains = A delight by reason = Of certainty and certainty = Depends upon a result = Achieved directly by a = Surprise not a surprise = In fact nor in thought’.⁸⁶ This goes on for over four pages, as if Stein is in the process of developing a complicated formulaic equation for the effect of history which never quite works out. Tanya Clement goes further, arguing that Stein’s mechanistic deployment of

⁸² Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft Press, 1969), p. 281.

⁸³ Retallack, *Selections*, p. 29.

⁸⁴ Stein, ‘Are There Arithmetics’, in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 198.

⁸⁵ Stephen Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. xxi original italics.

⁸⁶ Stein, ‘We Came A History’, in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 277.

language should also be replicated by her readership. The method of best processing Stein's work is not as a human, even critical, reader but as a machine. Through digital reading tools – text analysis and visualisations – Clement is able to identify patterns of 'recombinations and recombinatory words' around which the whole of *The Making of Americans* is structured.⁸⁷ Systemising should be met by systematising.

This, in turn, is comparable to Simpson's commitment to the construction of paintings by a systematicity, a measure and accuracy akin to mathematical formulae.⁸⁸ Simpson has described his paintings as being about neither ladders, squints, nor shadows but geometry: 'the gospel of verticals and horizontals'.⁸⁹ For Godfrey, it is the paintings' roles as still-lives or vanitas that inform Simpson's tightly choreographed compositions. He makes the analogy with Juan Sanchez Cotán's sixteenth-century mathematically precise arrangements of compositions of fruit and vegetables suspended against a black background.⁹⁰ Less sharply executed, but in keeping, is Zurbarán's *Four Vessels* who forms one part of chapter 2 of this thesis. The symmetry is apt.

To suggest that Simpson and Stein's approaches are in some way scientific sits somewhat uneasily. It might suggest a degree of pre-planning (hypothesising) and implementation (proving or disproving) which is at odds with the spirit of this thesis which foregrounds emergent ideas and intuitive associations over positivist claims and methods of research. I have discussed how Simpson reduces the pictorial elements of his paintings, varying each element almost in turn, a process that Dalwood likens to 'a control experiment'.⁹¹ Godfrey has also related how 'thoroughly planned' Simpson's paintings are, their 'measurements calculated and then executed'.⁹² If that is the case then how does the reality of this working method stack up against my suggestion that

⁸⁷ Clement, 'The Story of One', p. 428.

⁸⁸ Godfrey, 'Un-named Paintings', no page numbers.

⁸⁹ In conversation with the artist 3 March 2016.

⁹⁰ Godfrey, 'Un-named Paintings', no page numbers.

⁹¹ Dalwood, 'Study #6: Michael Simpson', no page numbers.

⁹² Godfrey, 'Un-named Paintings', no page numbers.

these paintings appear as embodiments of thoughts in progress? Surely, they are more like examples or illustrations of carefully drafted preconceived thoughts.

A more detailed view of Stein's dichotomous relationship with the idea of writing as crystallisation of imminent thought alleviates some of this tension. She is torn between the difficult aim to render the immediacy of experience and the desire for her work to enact a rigour that this immediacy counteracts. Retallack, for example, recalls B. F. Skinner's criticism of *Tender Buttons* for its laxness and evident use of automatic writing.⁹³ Riding and Graves similarly accuse Stein of using 'language automatically to record pure ultimate obviousness'.⁹⁴ Stein herself, in 'Composition as Explanation', is adamant that the nature of composition is 'naturally' processual, at once receptive of and sensitive to the process of its making: 'no one formulates until what is to be formulated has been made'.⁹⁵

Retallack, on the other hand, argues that Stein's projects are 'consciously framed investigations'.⁹⁶ Likewise, Nicola Shaughnessy's reading draws out the inherent artifice at play in Stein's dichotomous relationship to spontaneity and rigour. Shaughnessy points to the 'remarkable and frustrating' degree to which the handwritten manuscripts in the Stein archive differ very little from the published version: 'The vast majority of manuscripts are completely clean, and fluently written without the amendments, deletions or marginalia which one would expect from a draft manuscript.' This, argues Shaughnessy, 'gives the *impression* of spontaneous writing which barely requires editing', suggesting that there is an inauthenticity about Stein's ostensibly spontaneous writing.⁹⁷ Shaughnessy goes on to point out that there is, however, a great degree of planning that goes on before the stage of drafting manuscripts as evidenced in Stein's carnets. The kind of thinking that appears through her manuscripts is therefore still in the process, a continuation of the rougher beginnings held in the earlier

⁹³ Retallack, *Selections*, p. 8. Referencing B. F. Skinner, *Atlantic Monthly* (January, 1934).

⁹⁴ Riding and Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, p. 280.

⁹⁵ Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 497.

⁹⁶ Retallack, *Selections*, p. 9.

⁹⁷ Nicola Shaughnessy, *Gertrude Stein* (Tavistock: Northcote/British Council, 2007), p. 3 my emphasis.

notebooks. In fact Stein herself holds that of ‘the few who make writing as it is made,’ and we must assume that she is among the few, ‘the most decided of them are those that are prepared by preparing’. In Stein’s mind, then, no such dichotomy between the intuitive and the choreographed exists, it is all comprised of ‘the time when and the time of and the time in that composition’.⁹⁸ Sustained thinking, in other words, happens through the course of writing.

Adverbs: Continuously

Framing Stein and Simpson’s work as embodying such sustained and continuous thought characterises it as enacting extended moments of meditation on and through an experience, or the idea of an experience. Those moments are not, however, momentary. Stein coined a term for this; she called it the ‘prolonged’ or, more frequently, ‘continuous present’.⁹⁹ In her retelling of how *The Making of Americans* came about, for example, this continuous present lasts for a thousand pages ‘creating a more and more continuous present including more and more using of everything and continuing more and more beginning and beginning and beginning’.¹⁰⁰ Even in its recounting the continuous present endures: her continuous present was not created but is ‘creating’, everything was not included but ‘including’, her beginnings not continued but ‘continuing’. And then doubling back to the use of the past tense: ‘I went on and on’.¹⁰¹

How should we conceptualise such movements between past, present, and future in Stein’s work? In another text, Stein tightens and heightens the effect of these intertwining temporalities still further. She writes: ‘They were what I knew America was when I used to say what America is, only now it had been done, America had been able to do what America is.’¹⁰² It could be claimed that the frequent veering between

⁹⁸ Stein, ‘Composition as Explanation’, in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 497–498.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 498.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p. 499.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 499.

¹⁰² Stein, ‘How Writing is Written’, in *Previously Uncollected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, Robert Bartlett Hass ed. and intro. (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1973–74), p. 68. Referenced in Retallack, *Selections*, p. 13.

tenses renders the text ‘unreadable’ or ‘confusing’ as many have done.¹⁰³ But Retallack thinks otherwise: ‘This bundle of swerving tenses’, she says is, ‘an example of a revolutionary grammar *as* literary innovation *as* the composing of a new temporal logic’.¹⁰⁴ This goes beyond a continuous present because it also appears to crystallise the past and present in the manner of transparent overlays compressing the space of Stein’s past, present and future.

It is as compressed, we might say, as the space in Simpson’s squint series. Perspective, the means by which space is traditionally rendered, is always a little off, a little wrong, as a pedantic reading of Stein’s entanglements of tenses also have it. *Leper Squint 28* (Private Collection, Düsseldorf, 2015) (fig. 30) depicts a ramp with a small step at its base. Pictured in profile the top of the ramp is rendered as neither a proper plan view nor a perspectival view. There is no recession. It is skewed and mimetically nonsensical. The back of the ramp, which presumably we would hold to steady ourselves as we peer through the squint at the top right of the painting, is deep black, and, unlike the rest of the ramp, is pictured as if level with our line of sight. He also uses shadow to distort three dimensional space; light appears to hit the squint from above and to the left of the painting casting a softening shadow aslant around its edges. The shadow of the ramp, however, is pictured as a simple clean edged rectangle directly beneath the ramp itself, the angle of light even and vertical. The slight shading that appears on the end of the sloping step, however, suggests another source of light again, from the right hand side, this time. Spatial relations are thus not only compressed but conflicted or rather conflated. If we imagine the direction of the light source as relating to a particular time of day, then this painting captures morning, noon and afternoon in one continuous moment.

Adverbs: Historically

All of this discussion of Stein and Simpson’s surface, rhythm, and seriality is not to argue that their work is formalist, however. Both, as we have seen, commit to modes of

¹⁰³ For a fuller historiography of the ‘unreadability’ of Stein see Natalie Cecire’s excellent ‘Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein’, *ELH*, 82(1) (2015), p. 293.

¹⁰⁴ Retallack, *Selections*, p. 13.

philosophical, poetic and literary thinking, either by knowing reference or by a subconscious exploration of ideas that root their work's value beyond itself. Simpson is a bibliophile; his library of rare editions, periodicals and twentieth-century experimental literature that abuts his painting studio is given frequent mention by his critics.¹⁰⁵ In the 1980s he painted an enormous work entitled *Burial of Books* (Artist's Collection, 1984–85), which pictures a deluge of non-specific tomes and embodies his conflicted relationship with them as a 'symbol of knowledge that is both imposed on the individual but can also liberate him'.¹⁰⁶ The History of Art and the History of Ideas figure more specifically.

The motifs Simpson returns to are loaded by the history of their associations. His Bench series takes as its starting point the history of the execution of Giordano Bruno, a Neapolitan philosopher, astrologer, mathematician, poet and Dominican friar who was tortured before being gruesomely executed in the Roman square of Campo de' Fiori by the Inquisition in 1600. Bruno was charged with heresy for denying the existence of key catholic doctrines, as well as making such daring endorsement and extension of Copernican claims about the infinite nature of the universe. This history provides the oft cited backdrop to Simpson's Bench series which the artist himself describes as an 'homage' to Bruno, allowing Simpson a way to make reference to 'the infamy of religious history'.¹⁰⁷ Bruno is the invisible protagonist in this series, referenced in the classical typescript that spells out 'The Shadow of Ideas' (a translation of Bruno's seminal study on memory *De Umbris Idearum*) that hangs above one levitating bench, in the bench that carries the date of Bruno's death, 17 2 1600 in *Bench Painting 67 (Bruno Resurrect)* (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2008) (fig. 31).

¹⁰⁵ Harris, 'To think is to speculate', p, 52; Herbert, 'Michael Simpson', p. 85.

¹⁰⁶ Unattributed catalogue essay in 'Study #6: Michael Simpson' (2014), no page numbers. Simpson apparently planned a whole series of works entitled *The Stamping of the Book* which he never saw through.

¹⁰⁷ Simpson, 'Preface', in *Hymn. Psalm. Song. Prayer.*, no page numbers.

Stein, though, has often been read as an all-out self-conscious modernist, spurning content or narrative in favour of a life-long obsession with form.¹⁰⁸ In an interview between Nada Gordon and Benjamin Friedlander, Friedlander recounts how Jena Osman saw an ‘erasure of history as a liberatory gesture’ in Stein’s work.¹⁰⁹ Whereas for Friedlander, Stein ‘replaced Joyce’s historicism with a kind of writing which conceived of language as an autonomous system of signs’.¹¹⁰ In fact, her work repeatedly makes references beyond itself, to time and history, among other things. Publications like, ‘History. Or Messages from History’ (1930), ‘We Came. A History.’ (1930), *The Making of Americans*, and ‘The Winner Loses: A Picture of Occupied France’ (1942) all explicitly consider the effect of history and historical thinking.¹¹¹ ‘Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches.’ ‘This is not historical [...] This might be historical [...] This is historical [...] This is history because it is accompanied by reluctance. Reluctance is not necessarily history nor is decision,’ Stein intones.¹¹²

The impact of history in Stein and Simpson’s work often manifests obliquely, though. Retallack’s reading of the role of ‘the historical’, as opposed to ‘history’ – a term Stein considers homogenising and patriarchal – is particularly interesting, as she holds the effects of World War I and II as permeating Stein’s thinking in abstract ways. Her grammatical experimentation, Retallack argues, exposes the nature of Stein’s relationship with her historical moment. Her sentence structures and syntaxes are folded, compressed, and undone; they make possible a ‘reinvention of new ways of being in one’s time’.¹¹³ But they also, as Natalie Cecire describes, add up to form a ‘mimetic experience of History’: violent, dislocated, mechanistic.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ See DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein’s Experimental Writing*. And also Richard Bridgman, who describes the way Stein’s writing ‘veer[s] off into meaninglessness’, in Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 125.

¹⁰⁹ Nada Gordon and Benjamin Friedlander in conversation, <http://home.jps.net/~nada/ben2.htm>, [accessed December 12].

¹¹⁰ Friedlander, ‘A Short History of Language Poetry’, *Qui Parle*, 12(2) (2001), pp. 107–142, p. 121.

¹¹¹ Stein, ‘History or Messages from History’, in *Selections*, Retallack ed., pp. 254–274 and pp. 274–280.

¹¹² Retallack, *Selections*, p. 58.

¹¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 55–70, especially pp. 56–58.

¹¹⁴ Cecire, ‘Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein’, p. 299.

Harriet Scott Chessman builds a convincing case for Stein's interest in instances of historical literature too. She reads Stein's work as partaking in a distinct dialogue with words and their histories by reference to the romantics, Emerson and Keats. Chessman argues that Stein knowingly plucks Emerson's image of the rose, the apogee of perfection – 'There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence' – and redeploys it to draw attention to the perfection of the word 'rose' by knowingly tugging it from its historical roots. In Stein's version it is reformulated: 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose'. It is a technique she uses often, at once echoing and disowning nouns.¹¹⁵

Simpson's relationship with history, and art history in particular, is equally conflicted. 'Every time I begin a painting', he says, 'I have to really get myself together, and try to ignore the weight of history. The weight of the history of art, I mean'.¹¹⁶ He senses it as a psychological threat while also counselling young artists not to fear it.¹¹⁷ He talks at length about the breadth of his interest in visual forms which spans early Dutch church interiors, portraiture and De Stijl, Russian constructivism, seventeenth-century Spanish still-life painting and Surrealism, as well as Carlo Crivelli, Alexander McQueen, Samuel Beckett and John Cage. The way his paintings manifest these multiple traditions is distinctive, sometimes specific, at other times indirect: the drama of Cotán's mathematical arrangements reverberate; Mondrian's scrupulous high-contrast structures order, the rumpled fabric that lies under the tomb-like bench in *Bench Painting 73* (Blain Southern, 2009) (fig. 32) is haunted by the cloth of the draped figure of Poussin's *Landscape with the Funeral of Phocion* (National Museum, Cardiff, 1648) (fig. 33). Historical references are not appropriated, borrowed directly or necessarily even intended (I have not heard of Simpson referencing Poussin, for example), instead they exert forces akin to magnetic fields – at times hovering almost impalpably, at others exerting considerable pressure.

¹¹⁵ Harriet Scott Chessman, *The Public is Invited: Representation, the Body, and Dialogue in Gertrude Stein* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 79–87.

¹¹⁶ Simpson and Dalwood in Conversation, 'Study #6: Michael Simpson', no page numbers.

¹¹⁷ Simpson, *Michael Simpson Interview: Odyssey of a Painter*, Louisiana Museum of Art <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lj3o2KYkNE0> [accessed March 16 2016].

Even his surfaces repel and attract history; allowing history itself to become material in its own right, as vital as his brushes and rollers, ladders and benches, whites and blacks.¹¹⁸ The use of the roller, as opposed to primarily the paintbrush, for example, carries particular connotations. When rolled paint adheres to the canvas it creates seams where one application overlaps another. Paint applied in this way tends toward a regularity, an evenness that is more emotionally distanced than the application of paint by the stroke of a brush. Given the scale of Simpson's canvases rollers are also more practical, allowing for quick coverage across a large area. But their connotations as the favoured tool of painters and decorators slapping on a pot of Dulux cannot be overlooked, although Simpson has perfected a highly skilled, controlled and painterly technique through his use of rollers of various textures, shapes and sizes. This enables him to achieve not a pristine uniform finish, in the manner of a minimalist like Sol Lewitt, but a choreographed blemishing of colour, tone, and texture by recurrent layering, stripping, and degrading of surface. His use of the roller, therefore, functions, unexpectedly expressively. Yet again, the relationships his paintings make to the histories they reference are never straightforward.

There are references at play in his work other than those Simpson himself identifies. Harris describes them as 'vocal catalysts but [which] remain in a final sense, mute'.¹¹⁹ They prompt Burnett to see in Simpson's squints Malevich's black square, and therefore a reference to 'utopian ideas of modernist abstraction', or as 'portals to the infinite' recalling Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases.¹²⁰ Harris sees them as 'Kapoor-like', the black slabs of benches as reminiscent of Kubrick's *2001 A Space Odyssey*.¹²¹ John-Paul Stonnard sees in them Beckett's sparse stage sets and directions.¹²² And the classical lettering that Simpson employs in his signs above various benches recalls Roman street signs or perhaps Ian Hamilton Finlay's stone poem collaborations.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Harris, 'To think is to speculate', p. 56.

¹²⁰ Burnett, 'The Timbre of Our Limbs', p. 5.

¹²¹ Harris, 'To think is to speculate', p. 57.

¹²² John-Paul Stonnard, 'A Miracle of Escape', in *Michael Simpson: Flat Surface Painting*, Helen Legg ed. (Bristol: Spike Island, 2016), p. 52.

Some historical connections are quietly borne out in Simpson's colour palette. The hue of his intense black, for instance, resonates widely. Its deployment inverts that of the seventeenth-century still-lives of Zurbarán or Cotán in which scrupulously arranged and meticulously rendered vessels, fruit and vegetables usher from pitch-dark backgrounds. Simpson's black is pushed to the forefront, where it appears suspended. His backgrounds are never pure white but always not-quite-white and range deliciously from lilac tinged to coffee stained. Victorian aesthete John Ruskin once wrote, in a text that Simpson holds dear, that 'Velasquez is the greatest master of the black chords'. He tells how you must make 'the white in your picture precious and the black conspicuous'.¹²³ And so Simpson's fervent blacks press forth, standing proud, never appearing cavernous (like Anish Kapoor's Vantablack S-VIS, apparently the 'blackest black' pigment).¹²⁴ Simpson deals not in black, but blacks by degrees.

Sometimes his black is crystalline, akin to Wilhelm Sasnal's or Édouard Manet's. Or like Velasquez's *Philip IV of Spain* (National Gallery, London, 1627) in which the king's pious all-black attire picks out the stark white letter held in his hand. This kind of black evokes a glamour and mystery akin to *Bench Painting 67* (fig. 31). At times Simpson's black is matt (*Bench painting 77*) at others it clings to the shallow grooves of the painting's outermost layer (as at the base of *Minbar*). At others its surface is mottled with hairline cracks like *Bench Painting 77* (Schürmann Collection, Aachen, 2009), which recalls the current state of Malevich's *Black Square* whose surface has crazed

¹²³ John Ruskin, *Elements of Drawing* (London: Smith Elder, 1857), p. 159.

¹²⁴ Vantablack S-VIS, discovered by a Nono System, is not actually a pigment but made of densely grown carbon nano tubing. It absorbs more than 0.0035% of light and has been developed specifically for use in the military and astronomy. Anish Kapoor bought exclusive rights to the substance which has sparked outcry among other artists and curators. Kapoor's move led curator Stuart Semple to develop his own black called Black 2.0. According to the product description Black 2.0 'has been developed in close collaboration with thousands of artists from all over the world. Their amazing insight, support and inspiration has formed this unique super-black paint for the benefit of all artists* (*Except Anish Kapoor)' <https://www.culturehustle.com/collections/frontpage/products/black-v1-0-beta-the-world-s-mattest-flattest-blackest-art-material> [accessed 27 Jan 2018]. Bridget Delaney, "You could disappear into it": Anish Kapoor and his exclusive rights to the 'blackest black', *The Guardian*, (26 September 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/26/anish-kapoor-vantablack-art-architecture-exclusive-rights-to-the-blackest-black> [accessed 26 September 2016].

with age.¹²⁵ In his Confessional series, the sheer quantity and luminosity of Simpson's black is striking. The diptych, *Unnamed (Confessional)* (Private Collection, 2015) (fig. 34), is made from the most lustrous, sensual black velveteen; a slick that is buoyed by the surface painting but that also, when prodded, promises to leave behind an oily coating.

Adverbs: Sensually

The musical kinship of Stein and Simpson's work appears, at first sight, unlikely, especially so in Simpson's muted canvases. Many of Stein's critics cite musicality as a general characteristic of her writing. Wilder sees her lectures as 'written repose upon an unerring ear for musical cadence'.¹²⁶ Hardwick reads Stein's rhythmical variant repetitions as sharing something with Philip Glass's layered orchestral compositions.¹²⁷ Virgil Thomson considers Stein's structures as lying 'closer to musical timings than to speech timings', and Leonard Bernstein compares Stein to Berlioz, Stravinsky, and Richard Strauss.¹²⁸ Others, like Retallack, emphasise her texts 'oral-musical properties', which are conveyed less effectively in their appearance on a page, where they resemble the patterning of wallpaper, than when performed or spoken aloud.¹²⁹ Perhaps all this is not surprising given Stein's relationships with composers like Virgil Thomson and Reverend Al Carmines. Her plays and operas, which number over 75, were performed and often accompanied by music.¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Philip Shaw, 'Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square*', in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding eds., *The Art of the Sublime* (London: Tate Research Publication, January 2013). <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/philip-shaw-kasimir-malevichs-black-square-r1141459>, [accessed 07 February 2017].

¹²⁶ Wilder, *Narration*, p. v.

¹²⁷ Hardwick, *The Collected Essays*, p. 103.

¹²⁸ Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson: The State of Music and Other Writings* (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 105. The reference to Leonard Bernstein comes from Johanna Frank, 'Resonating Bodies and the Poetics of Aurality; Or, Gertrude Stein's Theatre', *Modern Drama*, 51(4) (2008), p. 519.

¹²⁹ Retallack, *Selections*, p. 12. See also Frank, 'Resonating Bodies', p. 515.

¹³⁰ Bonnie Marranca, 'Introduction: Presence of Mind', in *Gertrude Stein: Last Operas and Plays*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. xxii. Marranca does, however, suggest in this introduction that in fact Stein 'didn't like music and expressed an interest in seeing her work done without it', p. xxii.

More surprising is the frequency with which Simpson's critics turn to music in their efforts to convey a specific sense of the experience of his paintings. Harris meditates on how, 'Hovering before us they invite synaesthetic interpretation. I venture they might effuse something like a low hum, or even an organ chord, of the kind of opening / closing chimes on a track by somebody like Autechre'.¹³¹ Schwabsky invites us 'to be with [Simpson's Bench paintings], to be affected by them, immersing oneself in their rich though understated visual harmonies' which leads him to speculate that 'the experience of sharing a large room with a significant number of them would be something like hearing an austere but complicated piece of music like Thomas Tallis's *Spem in Alium*, 1570, a work for massed choirs surrounding the listener'.¹³² And, coincidentally, in a small room just off Simpson's 'Flat Surface Painting' (2016) exhibition at Spike Island, was Ruaidhri Ryan's *Belt Craft Studios*, a film about filming food but which also featured a tongue-in-cheek transcendent soundtrack of choral music which bled into the space of Simpson's paintings too.¹³³

These synaesthetic readings of Stein and Simpson are the result, partly, of the difficulty of finding appropriate words to describe them, so critics find themselves turning, albeit briefly, to examples of equivalence or at least comparison, in music, art or literature. These analogies appear as if compelled by the works themselves, a means to better come to terms with them. This is not a reading *into* the work, in the manner of the kind of archaeological interpretations that Sontag so objected to, but a reading *across*, triggered by the works' sensorially charged surface textures.

This sensuousness manifests in various ways. Meyer identifies Stein's 'waltz-like syntax'.¹³⁴ But this goes a step further when we realise that this dance is enacted with Stein's words, by you, her reader. It is as if as your eyes pass her words on a page, you join her in turning words over and over, as if handling them, exploratively fingering them. This becomes even more explicit when read aloud or whispered, as I so often find

¹³¹ Harris, 'To think is to speculate', p. 57.

¹³² Schwabsky, 'Michael Simpson's Bench Paintings', no page numbers.

¹³³ This coincidental link is also made by Peter Carey-Kent, 'Michael Simpson', *Frieze* (January 2016) <https://frieze.com/article/michael-simpson> [accessed 12 November 2017].

¹³⁴ Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*, p. 97.

myself doing, to ensure that the words enter me, don't just pass me by. I mouth them, my tongue makes space and also knots around them in an attempt not only to utter them, but to render them graspable. Stein's take on this is overtly sexualised. She relates how she 'caressed completely caressed and addressed a noun'.¹³⁵ Retallack's reading of Stein's eroticism is highly reminiscent of what Sontag calls 'an erotics of art'.¹³⁶ 'What does an eros of language mean?' Asks Retallack, 'In part, it is about pleasure in the words as fondled objects of poesis, radiant in their everyday connotations, not needing to point to transcendent meaning. But the performance of language is also a performance of a particular kind of desire – a desire to touch others, to know and be known through words'.¹³⁷

Her attempts 'to render the world present in language' are dependent on an intimacy of relations whereby writing almost literally embodies the world in its very texture.¹³⁸ Take Stein's articulation of colour. 'A sad size,' she writes, 'a size that is not sad is blue as every bit of blue is precious. A kind of green a game in green and nothing flat nothing quite nothing flat and more round, nothing a particular color strangely, nothing breaking the losing of no little piece.'¹³⁹ It is not that Stein describes the straightforward visual appearance of a colour here but the rhythm of her sentences evokes a texture that is halting, undulating, uneven, suggesting in some sense the difficulty (or impossibility) of articulating colour in words. The ring of texture spreads still further, seeping beyond the confines of the example just given. Her text evokes, for me, in the context of this thesis, the metaphorical texture of thought through writing. This kind of texture functions to convey how a thing – an object, a painting, a drawing, a text – came to look or feel or sound as it does. Its process of becoming perceived through its surface texture.

¹³⁵ Stein, *Lectures in America*, p. 231.

¹³⁶ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, p. 13. I discuss her 'erotics of art' in chapter 2.

¹³⁷ Retallack, *Selections*, p. 36.

¹³⁸ Chessman, *The Public is Invited to Dance*, p. 79.

¹³⁹ Stein, 'Tender Buttons', in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 131.

‘The sensual beauty of [Simpson’s] surfaces’, as Godfrey calls them, are also built on texture.¹⁴⁰ It is, of course, more commonplace to imagine a painting as a caressing of forms, a kind of fetishised stroking, wiping or dripping of viscous liquids across a surface with brushes and fingers. But these paintings are largely undertaken with rollers, a more physically detached mechanistic application of paint to canvas. But even a brief inventory of the effects of his paint application reveals the variety of touch that Simpson achieves. Paint is stippled, dimpled, dragged, streaked, even, raw, and smooth. It is glossy, matt, translucent, ragged, tacky, and patchy. It is applied with abandon, in underlayers, at other times, with exquisite precision. Some elements appear supremely human, almost skin-like in texture and tone, others appear mechanical in their meticulousness.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests ways in which textures like these foster certain physical or even sexually charged responses. After Renu Bora, Sedgwick relates how ‘to perceive texture is always, immediately, and de facto, to be immersed in a field of narrative hypothesising, testing, and re-understanding of how physical properties are acted upon over time’. Texture, or more specifically texture perception, is both seen and, either actually or imaginatively, felt and heard; it is inherently bodily. She continues: ‘To perceive texture is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does it impinge on me? Textual perception always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?’¹⁴¹ And, with this last question, Sedgwick frames texture – or as Simpson would put it, surface – as a sexualised overture. Texture is multi-sensory, it is an open, overtly flirtatious invitation that bridges the gap between the viewer and the viewed.

The intensity of Simpson’s colour adds to his works’ sexual aura. His use of black is especially interesting because of its funereal, depressive and also sexual connotations. *Unnamed (Confessional)* (fig. 34) is a painting of a church confessional rendered mainly in silhouette using a particularly luscious black. A vertically oriented diptych, one part is partially concealed by a grey-white curtain, the other inset with a white

¹⁴⁰ Godfrey, ‘Un-named Paintings’, no page numbers.

¹⁴¹ Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 13.

opening that houses a simple silhouetted black chair in profile. It might be a scene of refuge, promising anonymity, a safe place to bare all, psychologically. But an undulating, hyper-sensual white curtain, its ripples rendered in rubbed, dry black, hint that what goes on behind the curtain might entail a revelation that is more than metaphorical.

This suggestion of heightened sensual stimulation, enacted at once by the arrangements of objects and their rich rendering in painted surfaces, lends an immediacy to our experience of the works which is at odds with their subject matter. This in many ways is obscure; neither the leper squint, nor Giordano Bruno are exactly household names. Nevertheless their surfaces are flirtatious. And sometimes more or less ambiguously sexually suggestive. The idea of the bench, for example, resonates, for Simpson, as ‘a place where people might fuck.’¹⁴² More ambiguously the rich blue cloth in *Bench Painting 67 (Bruno Resurrect)* (fig. 31) hints at a respectful covering, albeit captured in the moment of slipping off (provocatively?) draped in baroque folds as if to respect the body we imagine shut up in the sarcophagus-like bench. On the floor below *Bench Painting 73* (fig. 32) the cloth, white this time, has fallen to the floor in a rumpled heap, its swirls of folds reminiscent of a dollop of whipped cream. I may be reading too much into these cloths but it does not seem so far fetched for markers of love and death to be so conjoined.¹⁴³

Adverbs: (Non) sensically

Simpson and Stein’s work teases in other ways too. So far I have not held back on tracing the paths that the associations of colours, textures, and sounds suggest. But tracing these lines is different from reading into them, in order to make sense of them. It is worth noting, in fact, just how ordinary many of Simpson’s painted objects are: step ladders, drains, benches, and pigeons. Even the way in which they are rendered in paint is straightforward, largely free of ornament or flourish. ‘There’s nothing unusual about it,’ William Pym writes, it is formally clear and simple, ‘legible’ and ‘completely

¹⁴² In conversation with the artist January 1 2016.

¹⁴³ Evocations of death in Simpson’s work have similarly been drawn out in Schwabsky, ‘Michael Simpson’s Bench Paintings’ and Price, ‘On the Leper Squint Paintings’, p. 253.

conventional in many ways, yet completely unresolved'.¹⁴⁴ This ordinariness does not, however, amount to straightforwardness; the paintings do not, strictly speaking, make sense.

But is it the role of the critic or historian to iron out the logical or rational discrepancies which haunt Stein's writing and Simpson's paintings? Of Simpson's depicted spaces we might ask: What are they? Where are they? Can I enter? Much of his work, at first sight at least, holds the suggestion of 'theatricality', in the words of Michael Fried.¹⁴⁵ Almost always unpeopled, chairs appear to be waiting to be filled, benches vacant, ladders unused. The implied possibility of human presence, by its very absence, compels. The paintings are surely invitations for us to sit, climb or, somehow, enter. But the suggestion is but a tease; closer inspection reveals walls and floors that never meet, ladders propped up at angles that are untenably sheer, his benches levitate, revealing that the forces of gravity, which make the world intelligible to us, are absent, and the shallowest depths of plane which physically exclude us from the scenes, and propel us back into the space of the gallery. The space Simpson renders is, mimetically speaking, nonsensical.

Trying to elicit meaning from these spaces and the objects propped up in them is a fool's errand. Stonnard draws on their Beckettian implications of a 'world past claim to meaning'.¹⁴⁶ This realisation leads to an understanding that, in fact, however metaphorically cryptic and visually ambiguous Simpson's subject matter appears, by focussing our attention on the objects represented and how they relate to us, as objects of potential use, we miss the point. His work is about neither ladders, nor benches, nor stairs, nor leper squints. It is about how the representation of these particular objects might behave, in the larger context of art history as well as the local context of each painting.

¹⁴⁴ William Pym, 'The Confidence Man', in *Study #6: Michael Simpson*, no page numbers.

¹⁴⁵ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1980).

¹⁴⁶ Stonnard, 'A Miracle of Escape', p. 53.

Stein's fascination with the stuff of everyday life in a text like *Tender Buttons* can be read in a similar vein to Simpson's depiction of the quotidian (holes, pigeons, stepladders).¹⁴⁷ Here she takes a series of simple familiar objects: a box, a chair, a dog, a red hat but the simplicity with which she treats them is more complicated. Under the subtitle 'A dog.', for example she writes of monkeys and donkeys.¹⁴⁸ Our mistake, according to Marjorie Perloff, is that those critics who have so often complained that Stein does not make sense, have fundamentally misunderstood the purpose and real subject of a text like *Tender Buttons*. In the subsection on roast potatoes Stein simply writes: 'Roast potatoes for'.¹⁴⁹ This is not, Perloff argues, a reference to cooking but a 'game of testing the limits of language, which is, for Stein, *the* game that matters'. It triggers certain semantic associations. Perloff offers a number of possible readings of the function of 'for' here: it begs why, what and for whom these potatoes be roasted; it plays on the number 4; it is a contraction of the preposition before (as in 'fore'); it is a hidden reference to the rhyme 'One potato, two potato...'; and it plays on 'four' the French for oven. Perloff's reading reveals considerable substance in Stein's apparently slight phrase, again, not by reading *into* the text but by close observation of its surface, its sonic and visual effect, as well as its semantic implications.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion: 'Making what is seen as it is seen'

I have, at various points in this chapter, framed both Simpson and Stein's work as crystallisations of thoughts. The relationship between form and content in Stein's work is predicated on the idea that her thought, and therefore her writing, arises as it goes along, as one word follows another, as a clause abuts another, as a sentence, or semi-sentence adjoins the next. These appear spontaneous, not thought and then transcribed, but thought as they are written. 'The great question,' Stein writes in 'Sentences and Paragraphs', 'is can you think a sentence'. Note, that she does not ask can you think *of* a sentence, the act of thinking and the sentence are not detached by a preposition which

¹⁴⁷ See Riding and Graves and their equivocal praise of Stein's 'divinely inspired ordinariness: her creative originality [...] was original only because it was so grossly, so humanly, all-inclusively ordinary', in *A Survey*, p. 280.

¹⁴⁸ Stein 'Tender Buttons', in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 140.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁵⁰ Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, p. 85.

might imply that one leads to the other. Rather they are one and the same, and temporally synchronous.¹⁵¹

Elsewhere, Stein's conception of writing is contextualised even more openly and precariously as temporally actual: 'what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen.' The act of seeing and the act of doing are mutually dependent where one affects the other. Not only that but 'those who describe' 'the thing' appear to have little control in determining the shape of their compositions. It is the meeting of seeing and doing that 'makes a composition'; it is not a person with free will writing down what they have seen. Even writing *with* misses the mark. The writing of which Stein speaks 'shows'; it does not tell, it is not *about*. In fact it doesn't even just *do* it also '*sees*' and also just *is*. All of this happens through the continuous present which 'makes what is seen as it is seen.'¹⁵² It does as it is doing; it writes as it is writing; it thinks as it is thinking.¹⁵³ The process and the form and the content all project into the space of the sentence as it appears on a page.

Many have remarked on Stein's intact manuscripts, revealing few mistakes, edits, or revisions. 'What she did,' argues Retallack, 'was something more like pinning a succession of sketches of the same object next to one another on a wall, where each revisiting leaves the previous one intact. Each moment in the writing is a new take in a process of revision *as* continuous permutation. This *is* her 'continuous present' – successive words or phrases reconfiguring what precedes them through repetition and variation.'¹⁵⁴ Put like this recalls Simpson's images which each, in their finished states, encapsulate a current moment of thought. Though Simpson throws away, or burns or cuts up or over paints images that displease him, the processes entailed in this

¹⁵¹ Stein, 'Sentences and Paragraphs', in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 253.

¹⁵² Stein, 'Composition as Explanation', in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 495.

¹⁵³ The similarities between this phrasing and Giovanni Gentile's 'thought thinking' will not have gone unnoticed.

¹⁵⁴ Retallack, *Selections*, pp. 43–44.

discarding are not usually made visible.¹⁵⁵ He does not usually leave the markings of his underdrawings visible in the manner of Richard Diebenkorn, whose amends are clearly visible through the transparent layers of successive paint. But the process of ‘constant revision’, as Retallack has it of Stein’s work, is clearly evident in Simpson’s extensive works in series: paintings of very few objects (like Stein’s relatively restricted palette of words) repeated, shifted, but with each iteration made ever more present.

This, my final substantive chapter, is the last iteration of the pairing of the work of a painter and writer. I cannot resist returning to the words of Oakeshott whose words inserted themselves in chapter 1 of this thesis.

Painters, sculptors, writers, musical composers, actors, dancers, and singers, when they are poets, are not doing two things – observing, thinking, remembering, hearing, feeling etc. and then ‘expressing’ or making analogues, imitations, or reproductions of what they have seen, heard, remembered, felt etc. in the practical world, and doing it well or ill, correctly or incorrectly – they are doing one thing, imagining poetically.¹⁵⁶

So here the poetic imagining at stake is to see one genre in the form of another, to envisage words reaching out of a page and tracing the striations of paint dragged across a canvas. It is to see painted forms speaking across their borders, the tongue of a brush touching words. It is to see the glide of a roller as the sweep of a hand, pressing the page flat, in readiness to write or read. And this work, my work, is only to see how these forms resemble one another, how they respond when placed side by side on a page, in a mind. This work mouths the conjoining of theirs so that the sounds it makes are a continuation of, an echoed reverberation of, the shapes and sounds of thoughts that theirs suggest.

This manner of going about research relies upon, indeed champions, imaginative leaps. It seeks to carve out a space in which to legitimise the flourishing of connections between, say, paintings and texts and the criticism written of them. It sees history and

¹⁵⁵ Though *Squint* (2016) reveals its state of having been cut away from one canvas and stretched over another by the fact that its painted surface wraps around the frame of the canvas, something Simpson rarely does – he usually paints up to or stops just short of the edge of the canvas.

¹⁵⁶ Oakeshott, *The Voice of Poetry*, p. 39.

criticism as the site of ‘potential space’ and emergent thought.¹⁵⁷ The ‘most deep rooted errors with philosophy’, notes Siegfried Zielinski via Wittgenstein, is that it considers possibility ‘a shadow of reality’. The associations I am suggesting, here and elsewhere, depend on ‘the possible’; ‘reality, which has actually happened, becomes a shadow by comparison’.¹⁵⁸ The shadow-characters that haunt Simpson’s paintings upset the order of naturalistic spaces by disconnecting objects from their neighbouring objects. And yet, the inconstant shading of objects and the outline of their forms cast below and beside them, take on the hum of Stein’s words as imperfect echoes:

Two next.
To be next to it.
To be annexed.
To be annexed to it.¹⁵⁹

Each word or phrase is cast from the felt sound or form of the one before as if light is shone on the first phrase and casts a mutating shadow over the next, and so on. So Pym has said of Simpson’s shadow ladders: ‘The shadow is proof of the sun, which allows us to grow. That’s the painting’¹⁶⁰

Is it too much to return to Stein’s oxymoronic: ‘Exact resemblance to exact resemblance the exact resemblance as exact as a resemblance, exactly as resembling, exactly resembling, exactly in resemblance exactly a resemblance, exactly and resemblance’ as an articulation or enactment of the spirit of this chapter which builds and modifies and repeats and turns over? Elsewhere I have called it analogy but even so the resemblance it draws out, and that it performs, is only ever imperfect.¹⁶¹ But it is the thought that counts. It seems to me that this kind of investigation, that juxtaposes two or more bodies is at the nub of Stein’s project as much as Simpson’s: what happens when two or more

¹⁵⁷ See Siegfried Zielinski, ‘An Archaeology and Variantology of the Arts and the Media’ (University of Bristol: Spring Lecture Series, 11 March 2013) on the idea of History as a ‘potential space’ rather than a ‘fact factory’.

¹⁵⁸ Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, Gloria Custance trans. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), p. 28.

¹⁵⁹ Stein, ‘An Elucidation’, in *A Reader*, Dydo ed., p. 435.

¹⁶⁰ Pym, ‘The Confidence Man’, no page numbers.

¹⁶¹ Stein, ‘If I Told Him’, in *Selections*, Retallack ed., p. 190.

things sit side by side, opposite, close by, askew? What is the nature and effect of these juxtapositions? When it comes to my project the arrangements of bodies mirror and also conflict and also merge. To what degree, these words wonder more than once, can writing (about/on/with) art 'exactly resemble' the art and the writing from which it emerges?

End Matters:
Improvisation and the Documentation of Felt
Encounters

We make language depend upon an awareness of truth when it is actually the vehicle of truth.¹

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, Claude Lefort ed. and John O'Neill trans. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 14.

This thesis puts art-historical writing, subjectivity and association into practice by taking seriously the facts of feeling in the process of research in the visual arts. I have avoided the term ‘Conclusion’ for this section; what I offer here is less a winding-up than a winding on. The stray ends, usually the stuff of a conclusory tying-up, are here left to fray further. Many such loose strands are alluded to in the body of this thesis but yet to be woven into patterns of their own, for example: metaphor as (improvised) method;² documentary as fiction/fiction as documentary;³ transhistorical research;⁴ and site-specific art writing/history;⁵ But does all this come under the remit of Art History?

On this last point I return to a phrase that surfaced in my fourth chapter: ‘To think is to speculate with images’.⁶ At stake throughout this body of work has been a speculative, or, to return to a term I used early on in this thesis, an improvisatory thinking through, and with, images – visual and verbal, literal and figurative. This begs a further question: is it still art history if art and writing take priority over claims of historical veracity? That is not to say that this thesis is unhistorical since it frames thinking as a speculation with and between words and images, between subjectivities and between historical time periods. Transhistorical coincidences and associations like the ones I have performed have been evoked by others too, of course. For Michael Ann Holly, Adrian Stokes’s

² For important discussions on metaphor see, Jan Zwicky, ‘Mathematical Analogy and Philosophical Insight’, *For the Learning of Mathematics* 30(1) (2010), pp. 9–14; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Second Edition (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2003); Ted Cohen, ‘Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy’ in *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1) (1978), pp. 3–12; Jacques Derrida, ‘White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy’, *New Literary History*, 6(1) (1974), pp. 5–74; Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

³ G. Douglas Atkins, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2005).

⁴ This theme is flagged in chapter 1, and alluded to throughout, but its implications for a philosophy of art-historical thinking are not fully developed through the thesis.

⁵ Alluded to in relation to Wai Chee Dimock, ‘Weak Theory’, p. 737. Jane Rendell, *Site Writing*; and more obliquely, through Steven Connors on the topological writing of Michel Serres in ‘Serres and the Shape of Thought’, <http://www.stevenconnor.com/topologies/> [accessed 2 December 2018].

⁶ This particular phrase is often quoted on treatises on the art of memory, a field of scholarship which indirectly informs the kind of associative threads I follow in this thesis but which I do not overtly address. For further research in this area see the seminal Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1999); as well as Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Second Edition (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Lina Bolzoni, *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing Press*, Jeremy Parzen trans. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001). A more recent particularly interesting text which combines memory, philosophy, science-fiction and visual images by artist Liam Gillick is Simon Critchley’s *Memory Theatre*, (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2014).

writing – which, incidentally, appeared earlier as one of Matthew Rampley’s examples of poetic art histories – is ‘evocative of a few unforgettable passages about the past in the disparate writings of Aby Warburg, Fernand Baudel and Martin Heidegger’. Holly goes on to observe that it is ‘almost as though a conversation were going on among the four of them – which of course, chronologically could not have been – beneath or beyond their manifest subject matter’. This leads her to ponder: ‘Where do correspondences come from, and how else do we write about these resonances except through the melancholic imagination that gathers bits and pieces together to construe another kind of narrative?’⁷ This a-chronological gathering together of correspondences is certainly present here (less so her sense of the melancholic) and her identification of these correspondences as contributing to an alternative ‘kind of narrative’ very much overlaps and runs parallel with the desire – expressed by Michela Atienza who appeared in chapter 1 – for the hybridity of fictocritical writing to ‘allow us to say “something else”’.⁸

In trying get to grips with the nature of the correspondences Holly is interested in, she turns to Christopher Bollas’s characterisation of aesthetic appreciation as consisting of ‘a deep subjective rapport with an object’ which is ‘an uncanny fusion with the object’ and the result of ‘something never cognitively apprehended but existentially known’.⁹ The ‘subjective rapport’ enacted in this thesis is less of a fusion and more, as I have put it elsewhere, a confluence or bleeding or bringing into orbit. Though the various agents at play – the artwork, the text and my own thinking – at times merge, they also remain, at the same time, discrete.

But Holly bases her other ‘kind of narrative’ on a distinction between making art and writing about it, between intentions and consequences, both of which distinctions run counter to the spirit and tone of this thesis. Bollas’s claims for aesthetic appreciation, Holly argues, are perhaps ‘the aim of making art [...] but not the result of writing about

⁷ Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 62.

⁸ Atienza, ‘Strange Technology’, p. 42.

⁹ Christopher Bollas, *The Christopher Bollas Reader*, Arne Jemstedt intro. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 3 and 11, and referenced in Michael Ann Holly, ‘The Stones of Solace’, in *The Coral Mind*, Stephen Bann ed. (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007) pp. 206–207.

it, for language inevitably puts distance between the work and the apprehending subject.’¹⁰ This assertion brings to the surface three issues which this thesis presses against. First, the implication of Holly’s remarks is that making art does not include language, which of course it does both literally in the fact of physical words being included in art but also conceptually where art might function as a form of non-verbal language or means of communication or expression. Secondly, I hope that language, in the way that I have used it here does not ‘put distance between the work and the apprehending subject’ but draws out convergences, distils instances of analogy and draws attention to coincidences between instances of art and writing that, at first sight, appear remote. Language here is, as I have put it, absorbent of its environment. And thirdly, I have aimed throughout this thesis, to dilute the distinction between making art and writing about it, seeking in the course of its composition, to do both at the same time, or as we saw Oakeshott put it, ‘doing *one* thing, imagining poetically’.¹¹

The upshot is to move art-historical thinking closer to the practice of making art. In Gavin Parkinson’s account of a Metafictional Historiography of Art, for example, he challenges

deductive art history’s increasingly prevalent formula of theory = meaning = truth, allowing the discipline to renounce historicist and “scientist” empiricism for the poetry, fiction, and parody of play. In place of interpreting, describing, representing, circumscribing, immobilising, or making art mean, [Metafictional Historiography of Art] writes through, mirrors, echoes, and rebounds off art. It aims not to inquire into what art means but to discuss how it creates meaning and to show what it can do. It wants to position art history closer to art than to history’.¹²

To frame the current thesis in this way, teasing out the art from the history, also brings my thesis back to the way in which it sits, deliberately, between a traditional humanities research-based PhD and a practice-led PhD and exploits the resultant friction that its positioning between these two camps creates.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 207.

¹¹ Oakeshott, ‘*The Voice of Poetry*’, pp. 36–37.

¹² Gavin Parkinson, ‘Metafictional Historiography of Art’, <https://courtauld.ac.uk/people/gavin-parkinson> [accessed January 31, 2013], since removed.

Put like this, the material, referential and linguistic differences and similarities in this thesis become something less oppositional, something more like divergences, analogies, confluences and associations which are set to work in particular and mutable ways. Its texture and approach is threaded through with ideas of joining and mirroring, metaphor and comparison. These qualities are present in the way the words, my words, write themselves – embody, rather than solely convey – and the way that words and images of others converge. Through the writing of the pairings and clusters that inhabit each chapter, ideas and modes of thinking around and between art, writing, criticism, history and literature are enacted slippily, discordantly, intermittently and swarmily.

Though the poetic and imagistic overtones, present in the previous paragraph as throughout this work, should not be understood as undermining the more familiarly or conventionally ‘art-historical’ thought that underpins this thesis. In fact the balance that I have at all times been negotiating, here, between scholarly rigour and experimental innovation, is a tension that characterises all improvisatory practices. On this point I could go further than I have up until now and frame this entire thesis as resulting from what amounts, often subconsciously, to an improvisatory research methodology.¹³

The absence of more explicit, and indeed frequent, reference to ‘improvisation’, though inadvertent, is worth flagging. In *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies Volume 1* (2016) George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut argue that contemporary culture has, until recently, been reluctant to embrace the term ‘improvisation’ due to its associations with dilettantism and a lack of rigour. Among the many publications Lewis and Piekut reference to support this claim is a research proposal by Susan Foster, Adriene Jenik, and Lewis himself which identifies the extent to which ‘improvisative practices were often erased, masked, or otherwise discussed without reference to the term. Substitutions such as ‘happening,’ ‘action,’ and ‘intuition’ often masked the

¹³ On improvisation see: Gary Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art*; Lewis and Piekut, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies Volume 1*; Ben A. Owen and Kit Poulson, ‘Mutter Physics’, an evening of improvisation and collaboration in which I performed ‘I am writing in a room’ (2018) alongside Ben A. Owen, Spike Island, 12 April 2018.

presence of improvisation'.¹⁴ In this thesis I have found myself using terms that similarly closely relate to the improvisatory. My references to, for example, 'intuition', 'spontaneity', 'activity' and thinking or working 'in progress' (as Eco would put it¹⁵) are not used to mask the *ad-hoc* nature of my approach to research – on this I have been consistently overt – but as another way to register the unplanned, open-ended, responsive and receptive nature of my 'speculation' through images and texts.

But perhaps 'improvisation' functions as a useful umbrella term that covers many of the processes and approaches to research that I have been negotiating. I have, for example, referred to various socially defined modes of intercommunication, both scholarly and quotidian, that share improvisatory properties. I speak of coupling and pairing, ventriloquising, triangulation, noticing, observing and cross-referencing. In fact, after Michael Oakeshott, I ground much of what goes on here in conversation. One of the underlying claims made in Landgraf's study of improvisation is that 'dialogue and the dynamics of communication [constitute] a model of improvisational practice'.¹⁶ The model has led to a crucially, for my purposes, reflexive approach since as author I have been at pains to maintain at once my agency in this discussion without dominating it. I work hard to understand the rules of the disciplines within which I work but choose to work between and sometimes against them. The decision to take this work in certain directions was not made wholesale or on a whim, but piecemeal and with caution; ideas and images (metaphorical and literal) emerged gradually, as conversations with the work of other scholars and writers were staged, as images were dwelled upon, as associations were sparked, and as Holly puts it, as convergences are followed up.

According to Landgraf, after Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) and later Judith Butler (1956–), another way in which improvisation manifests is through the assertion of

¹⁴ See Lewis and Piekut, 'Introduction: On Critical Improvisation Studies', in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies Volume 1*, p. 4. Referencing Susan Foster, Adriene Jenik, and George E. Lewis, 'Proposal for a 2002–2003 Resident Research Group: Global Intentions: Improvisation in the Contemporary Performing Arts.'

¹⁵ Eco, 'The Poetics of the Open Work', p. 174.

¹⁶ Discussed in Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art*, p. 10. And Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

agency from within a context of laws or strict rules.¹⁷ Crucially this thesis holds its subjective ‘mode’, as I have called it, at all times in productive tension with the discipline (the ‘rules’, as it were) of Art History at large. Indeed, just as performed musical improvisations are predicated on a thorough mastery of one’s instrument and understanding of musical genres, this thesis depends upon a firm understanding of the rules of the art-historical game and which I have laid out in-depth, especially in chapter 1.¹⁸ But, more broadly, the fact is also that I have chosen to work on this project from within a History of Art department, with all the particular expectations and highly structured requirements that a thesis written from within such an environment demands. Even in my final chapter, which at face value is the most loose, the most overtly ‘poetic’ or ‘experimental’ of all, I have chosen to keep the lines of communication between this thesis and art history alive.

Another way to account for my lack of explicitness in referencing improvisation up until this point is Gilbert Ryle’s assertion, made in 1976, that *all* thinking is improvisatory because it situates itself between understanding, gained from previous experience and/or learning, and an *ad hoc* encounter with new experiences. Ryle makes his point based on ‘a general notion or notions of *thinking*’ explaining how in the thought response of, as he calls his speculative thinker, ‘*Le Penseur*’,

There must be [...] a union of some Ad Hockery with some know-how. If the normal human is not at once improvising and improvising warily, he is not engaging his somewhat trained wits in some momentarily live issue, but perhaps acting from sheer unthinking habit. So thinking, I now declare quite generally, is, at the least, the engaging of partly trained wits in a partly fresh situation. It is the pitting of an acquired competence or skill against an unprogrammed opportunity, obstacle or hazard.¹⁹

But if all thinking is improvisatory then surely we could just call it ‘thinking’ or ‘thought’? Both of these terms, as I have discussed, feature strongly throughout this thesis. The problem, though, arises when thinking is not always presented as an exercise in improvisation. Given the unjustified but enduring stigmatisation of the model of

¹⁷ Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁸ Lewis and Piekut, ‘Introduction: On Critical Improvisation Studies’, p. 5.

¹⁹ See Gilbert Ryle, ‘Improvisation,’ *Mind* 85(337) (1976), 69–83, pp. 71 and 77.

improvisation – stereotyped as casual, undirected and self-indulgent solipsism – scholars and academics (that is, professional *thinkers*) have sought refuge in framing thought in terms that appear quite non-improvisatory.²⁰ The lack of rigour, again, wrongly associated with improvisation, may in part be why scholars are reluctant to let this element show through their work, therefore leading to the kinds of art histories – to return again to Parkinson, whom I referenced early on – that consist of,

the communication of thoughts, feelings, findings, and arguments about objects, events, and the past by means of the carefully and coherently organized plan; observation of and respect for causality and the clock and calendar time of the world; dissolution of authorship or announcement of subjectivity in the capture of the surveyed material; use of reason in search of rational connectivity between human beings, their contexts, behaviour, and work; and the exercise of balance and ‘critical distance’ in search of underlying motivations, interpreting phenomena in the services of conclusivity by means of methods that mimic those of scientific causality (whether this goes undeclared or not).²¹

Any notion of *ad hoc*, impromptu, risk-taking approaches to researching, thinking and writing are for the most part eviscerated from the kinds of art histories which Parkinson here characterises. So perhaps this is the moment to call out, in hindsight, the kind of thinking performed in this thesis as, by nature, improvisatory.

Due to this intuitive handling of its materials this thesis deals, as I have said, with connections-in-the-making by bringing discrete works, bodies of work, and their receptions, together. Its overall effect is one of ‘real-time’ unfurling. But we should also be mindful of the end results and implications of the ideas to which this lived thing has given rise and, to return to a discussion I raised in chapter 1, of its potential future uses in scholarship. Early on, for example I asked – after Matthew Rampley’s critiques of ‘poetic’ art histories – whether a thesis written in this mode can also be described as useful? Does it provide a followable method on which other scholarship can build? Does it ‘tame’ the images and texts to which it refers, or submerge them in its own

²⁰ For a discussion of improvisation’s stigmatisation see David Gere, ‘Introduction’, David Gere and Ann Cooper Albright, eds., *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p. xv.

²¹ Gavin Parkinson, ‘(Blind Summit) Art Writing Narrative, Middle Voice’, in Grant and Rubin eds., ‘Creative Writing and Art History’, p. 270.

anomalous language and style? Following my initial explicit discussion of these questions I deliberately allow the chapters themselves to demonstrate – to show, not tell – how the approach enacted here might be of scholarly use. Chapter 2, for example, begins with what might be called a poetic iteration of Francisco de Zurbarán’s *Still Life with Four Vessels*. As a strategy for ‘getting to know’ an artwork this is eminently ‘followable’. But the chapter also compares this initial approach with close readings of extant interpretations of the painting and, later, through an expansive, experimental coupling of the still life with the work of Susan Sontag. In doing so the initial poetic mode is put to ‘work’ on a discussion about the possibilities and limitations of interpretation and understanding. These shifting, reflexive perspectives into and out of the painting (and indeed the pairing) mean that neither Zurbarán’s still life nor Sontag’s words are ever, as I put it in chapter 2, ‘grasped’ or brought to heel, or as Rampley would put it ‘tamed’.

The phrasing above, where I suggest that the works of art that appear in this thesis are ‘put to work’ is a curious one and worth flagging. Though I have not as yet addressed it explicitly in this thesis, it is an implicit function of the way that my writing responds to and grows out of the particular pairings of artworks and texts that appear in each chapter. Art and text have, quite literally, *enabled* the subsequent discussions around and between them to emerge. I am suggesting that the pairings themselves, and their handling in this thesis, are equivalent of the way that Mieke Bal, for example, characterises artworks like Louise Bourgeois’s *Spider* as a ‘theoretical proposition’ wherein the artwork ‘effectuates [a] proposition – “enunciates” it – through its imposition of a bodily participation’.²² But it also keys into Andrew Benjamin’s resolve to draw out ‘how a given work of art *works* as art’.²³ This thesis takes that proposition further by asking how the given works of art work in relationships of association and also, how the work of this thesis itself *works*.

The work of these chapters can, therefore, be followed and built upon by others in a number of ways. Its basic structure homes in on and assimilates the resonances

²² Bal, *The Architecture of Art Writing*, p. 34.

²³ Andrew Benjamin, *Art’s Philosophical Work* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015), p. xvi.

perceived between a given image and a text. These ‘pairings’ set in motion particular discussions – ranging from methodology, to the function of writing on art, to interpretation – which emerge from the frissons generated by the particularity of the couplings themselves. At the heart of all this is my effort to register the personal and scholarly encounters that ensue through research into art and writing, and to document and embody the feeling of those encounters here. The possibilities for this model of scholarship are far-reaching. If, as I have argued, this thesis documents a sustained encounter with art, writing and research, can it also, more provocatively, be said to be *more* real than art-historical accounts that tend to overlook these human encounters?

Certainly, if we follow G. Douglas Atkins’s claim that the form of the essay is an ‘embodiment of truth’ or conveyor of ‘embodied truth’, this assertion seems viable.²⁴ Atkins argues this case by situating the essay on a continuous line that links fiction and philosophy: experience is the preserve of fiction, reflection of philosophy, he says. The essay, as ‘reflection upon experience’, lies somewhere in-between.²⁵ Atkins, also sees the essay as a means for transcendence that points towards ‘Ultimate Truth’ which religious connotations, do not, however, ring true for my work.²⁶ Nevertheless, we could take a step back and think about the role that writing has played here in the on-going generation of material, of thought, of associations and their concomitant improvised entanglements here dwelled upon. In being thought, do these observations or entanglements become real? We might then modulate Merleau-Ponty’s critique, with which this section began: rather than understand art history writing as depending upon ‘an awareness of *reality*’, in this thesis is art history writing actually a ‘vehicle of *reality*’?²⁷

If that is the case instead of allying this thesis with creative fiction, as accounts developed in this mode have previously done, we might instead frame it as

²⁴ Atkins, *Tracing the Essay*, pp. 5, 133–144, and 147–151.

²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 148–149.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 152.

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p. 14.

documentary.²⁸ That is not to say that some of those fictional strategies do not remain; this thesis enjoys its performativity, often using rhetoric (metaphors, simile, ellipses, tricolons), employing devices such as delays and opening chapters *in medias res*. These were usually not employed deliberately but through the process of writing particular strategies seemed most accurately to convey a sense of how the research material I was addressing appeared to coalesce in my mind and on the page. I make no claims, of course, to an un-mediated re-presentation of the reality of this research, since the research and its presentation happened hand-in-hand. Rather the reality it presents is thoroughly mediated, complicated by its interest in moving art-historical thinking closer to art.

I am not claiming originality in my interest in nudging art history and art into closer alignment, of course. I have already drawn attention to Stephen Bann and Gavin Parkinson, among others, who express a similar interest. But Christa-Maria Lerm-Hayes, goes further suggesting, more positively that this is already the case: ‘Modern and Contemporary Art History,’ she writes, ‘*is* creative art history – and it reaches into curatorial practice, creative writing, art writing, conceptual writing – as well as the mediation and contestation of cultural production in and through all modes of practice’.²⁹ Though Lerm-Hayes overstates her point – not all modern and contemporary art history does cross over in this way – I agree that the preserves of art history, art, writing and curatorial practice can be mutually porous. But even if we agree on this point in principle, we should nevertheless be asking how the interpenetration between art, writing and history might actually materialise in art-historical practice. How can we contribute to, develop and expand this strand of ‘creative art history’?

In this thesis I have interrogated this question by being alert to the implications of its intrinsic improvisations. Throughout I am alert to the consequences or what I am doing

²⁸ For examples of alignments with creative fiction see: Stephen Benson and Clare Connors eds., *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Catherine Grant and Patricia Rubin eds. ‘Creative Writing and Art History’, *Art History*, 34(2) (2011), Paul Barolsky, ‘Art History as Fiction’ in *Artibus et Historiae*, 17(34) (1996), pp. 9–17. See also the forthcoming session for the Association of Art History Annual Conference 2019 entitled, ‘Fiction with footnotes’: Writing Art History as Literary Practice’.

²⁹ See Christa-Maria Lerm-Hayes, *Writing Art and Creating Back: What can we do with Art (History)?* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2015), p. 17. My italics.

as I am doing it; I am doing while seeing and responding to what is being done. I have not, in the main, sought to iron out the apparent contradictions or clashes that emerge when these two modes – the active and reflective – collide, after the moment of their thinking and writing. As such the words that appear here retain a sense of the provisionality, mutability and presentness of thought, a sense in which these thoughts would, at a different time, according to a network of other research, professional and personal interests, have appeared quite otherwise. The particular pairings, clusters and their expression in my words are markers of site-specific moments of thinking and seek to capture, or again, document, these moments in their open, unresolved and relatively unpolished states.

The writing of the authors who feature in my chapters operates similarly: Gertrude Stein pinpoints the importance of her portraits as explorations of ‘the way that portraits [...] are written, by written I mean made. By made I mean felt’; for Susan Sontag ‘The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.’; and what I described as ‘the flowing and eddying’ of Walter Pater’s text enacts the accumulative, responsive and intuitive effects of his freewheeling thought.³⁰ This written, made, and felt thesis does likewise. And as it does it ‘pursues its own ideas’, as Roland Barthes would have it.³¹ In a way this is why it does what it does in the way that it does: to pursue associative and expansive and critical ideas that I could not have thought without it.

One of the many considerations when putting together an extended essay such as this, that veers between the conventionally scholarly and the experimental, is how the whole thing will hang together. When I began, and even finished the first complete chapter (chapter 2 as it appears here) I had no idea what the following chapters would hold: would the dots of each discrete case study – or imaginary portrait, in the language of Pater and Stein – ever join? I had a strong feeling *that* but not *how* they would. It is

³⁰ Gertrude Stein, ‘Portraits and Repetition’, in *Lectures in America*, Wendy Steiner intro. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1935), p. 165; Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 14; see chapter 2 of this thesis.

³¹ This pursuit comes about for Barthes through the pleasure of the text and quality that is implicit in the writing of this thesis. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, Richard Miller trans. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 17.

worth taking stock of some of their unforeseen interconnections; interconnections that, again, only became evident through the writing into orbit of these pairings. Pater devoted a book to Giordano Bruno to whom Michael Simpson dedicated over a decade's worth of paintings. Sontag's 'Against Interpretation' is identified by Gabriel Roberts as being 'remarkably Paterian'.³² Shadows and/or reflections play a pivotal role in Zurbarán's still life, in many of Doig's landscapes and also in Simpson's paintings of ladders and benches. I should re-emphasise that none of these connections were intended, conscious, and only revealed themselves through the process of thinking the thesis.

We return, then, to a sense in which this thesis *documents* the improvised process of everyday thinking. This claim might at first sight, seem at odds with some of the writing at play here which is flecked with characteristics and emphases more closely affiliated with creative writing than the documentary, with its pretensions towards objectivity and proximity to the 'real'. Lyrical expression, metaphor, description, narrative, invention, personification, drama and mood all prevail here. The structure of this thesis and its embrace of webs of expansive, transhistorical, serendipitous, associative thinking might sooner be termed 'creative' or even 'fictional' rather than 'scholarly' or 'non-fictional'. But instead of understanding these as fictionalised additions, I suggest that the modes and tones I employ here, are in fact, closer to the 'real' or 'felt' processes of (improvised, as Ryle has it) thought, research and the experience of encounters between and around images and texts, which other more systematic methodologies might in fact, conceal. That said, I am also apprehensive of setting up a reductive or false dichotomy between fiction and reality by aligning the documentary with reality and fiction with creativity; the relationship between fiction and documentary is more nuanced than that.

This strand of thought also raises the possibility that the associative and subjective approach I have taken here provides a mimetic counterpart to a phenomenological encounter through art, writing and research. When I express, for example, a hope to find

³² Gabriel Roberts writes: 'The literariness of Pater's writing (whether in its vast imaginative scope or its studied indeterminacy of phrasing) gets lost in the pursuit of meaning, system, and theory. The teleological pursuit of expressible meanings has resulted in unwarranted exegesis, critics too often guilty of what Susan Sontag termed (in a remarkably Paterian essay) 'the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them', in "Analysis leaves off": The Use and Abuse of Philosophy in Walter Pater's *Renaissance*', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 37(4) (2008), 407–425, p. 409.

in my writing an equivalence to a work of art or an encounter with a work of art, or – as I do here – a desire to document the feelings of an encounter, I introduce the possibility of enacting a real, felt, experience. Holly suggests rather that it is ‘the objective impulse’ not the subjective, that is, ‘in its own way, a mimetic impulse: the attempt to make the historical representation and the “real” coincide’.³³ Rather than *making* two or more agents or impulses ‘coincide’ this thesis simultaneously enacts and reflects upon such coincidences. The approach taken here instead attends to (rather than compels) real – by which I mean felt – coincidences of thought, and of resonance, and explores the implications that emerge from these non-historical, non-causal relationships. The nature of the insights that come about through such an approach to research materials – that dwells on and through an explicitly subjective mode but that at the same time claims to document the feeling of encounters – has, I argue, wide-ranging implications for thinking from a variety of perspectives.

To this Giovanni Gentile, who formed an important part of chapter 1, would respond: ‘The only solid reality that I must affirm—and to which any reality I might think must be tied—is this: only through the act of being thought can that which thinks and is realised become a reality’.³⁴ Reality is, therefore, not an entity which is external to us, that we are responsible for communicating, representing or reenacting; it is a state that we ourselves create through the act of thinking, perceiving, observing, experiencing and articulating. I merge this claim with elements drawn from Davidson’s theory of ‘triangulation’ in which multiple observations of external matter are shared and cross-referenced, thereby ensuring scholarly rigour. In chapter 3, for example, I identified similarities between the linguistic responses of scholars to Pater and Doig’s work. These similarities appeared to align with my own sense of the analogical relationship between Pater’s writing and Doig’s painting which were rendered in similarly watery terms, through condensation, confluence, reflection, drifting and surfacing. This wide-ranging cross-referencing in some ways tests the value of my subjective observations and associations, resituating them in a broader academic context. Its remit of interest and

³³ Holly, ‘Melancholy’, p. 65.

³⁴ Giovanni Gentile, ‘Basic Concepts of Actualism’ in Bruce Haddock and James Wakefield eds., *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2015), p. 345.

use, therefore, goes beyond the relative, the incidental, or – as Rampley would put it – the anomalous.

The form of the essay has stood me in good stead, then. ‘The essay’, as Atkins rather beautifully puts it, ‘is a creature of poise [...] a thing of composure that, balanced, hangs between’ – here, between the documentary and fiction, between art, art writing, history, criticism, as well as philosophy, and between self and other.³⁵ Whatever our preferred methodological approach to the visual arts, this thesis is intent on demonstrating that we should also embrace our disciplinary in-betweens and the productive tensions wrought by our improvised shuttling between felt experiences and extant contextualising frameworks or historiographies. We should be alert to the living *murmurations* – to return to the image with which this thesis opened – of mood, shape, tone and timbre of our thought and writing and its far-reaching reverberations. Channeling an associative, subjective and, ultimately, improvisatory mode has enabled me to pay attention to and at the same time, contribute to these murmurations. I have been able, simultaneously, to anchor my thinking within existent art-historical methods while pointing towards a model of art history writing that not only confronts the presence of its encounters, but critically and creatively assimilates them. The coincidences of attention I tease out between these encounters would be difficult to anticipate through other methodological means. I therefore linger long over how those associations manifest, how they are drawn into orbit and what their wider implications might be by performing, interrogating, documenting, even mapping, the encounters that emerge through my approach to thinking and writing around visual and textual matter.

³⁵ Atkins, ‘Tracing the Essay’, p. 151.

List of Illustrations

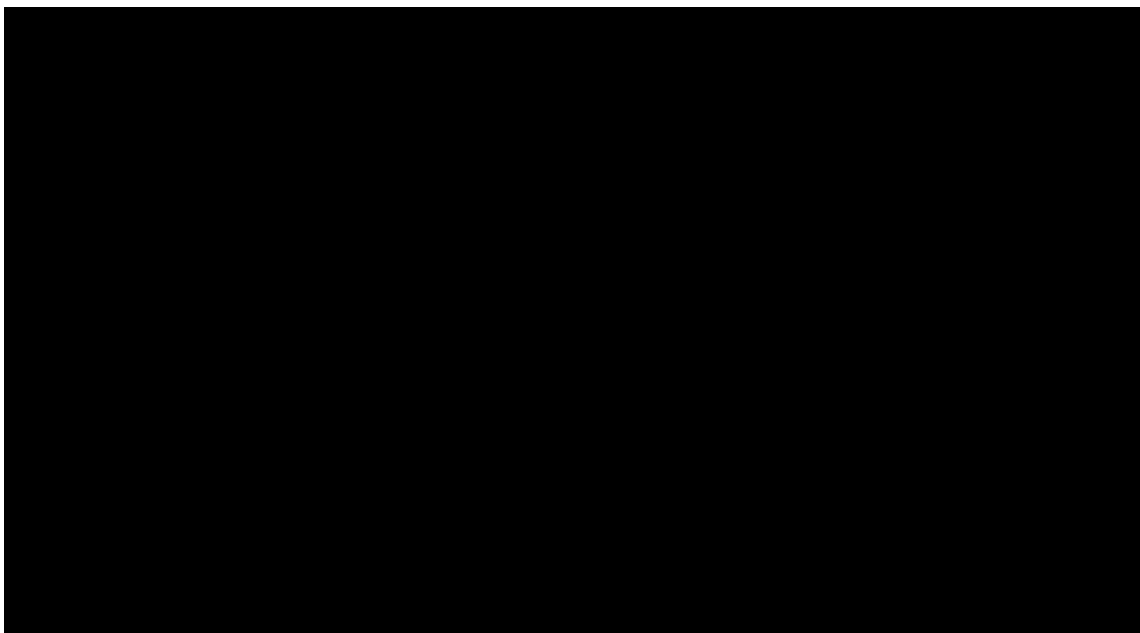


Fig. 1 Francisco de Zurbarán
Still Life with Four Vessels
c. 1660
Oil on canvas 46 x 84 cm
The Prado, Madrid

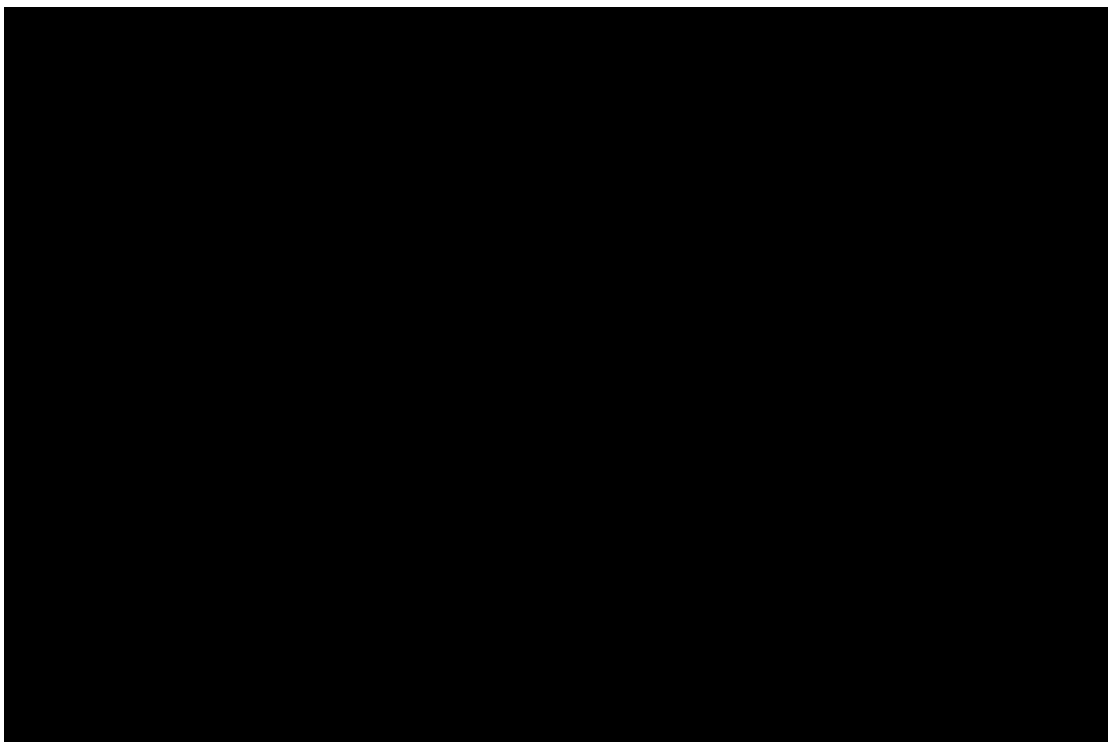


Fig. 2 Tino Sehgal
These associations
Performance 24 July –28 October 2012
Tate Modern, London
(Photograph by Richard Bunce)

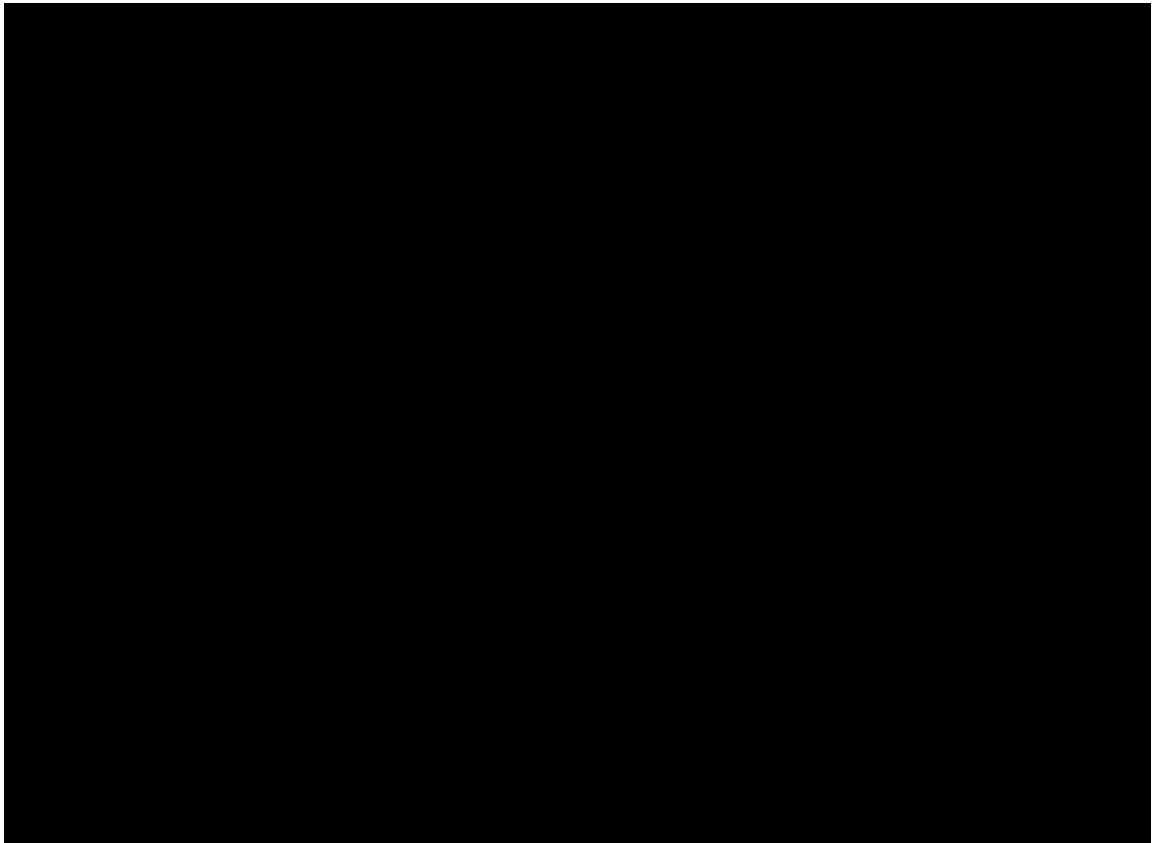


Fig. 3 Damien Hirst
*Isolated Elements Swimming in the Same
Direction for the Purpose of Understanding (Left)*
1991
Glass, painted MDF, rammin, steel, acrylic, fish,
formaldehyde solution
1829 x 2743 x 305 cm
Prada Collection, Milan,



Fig. 4 Wolfgang Tillmans
Black Socks On Radiator
1998
Chromogenic color print, printed 2012
40.6 x 30.5 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York

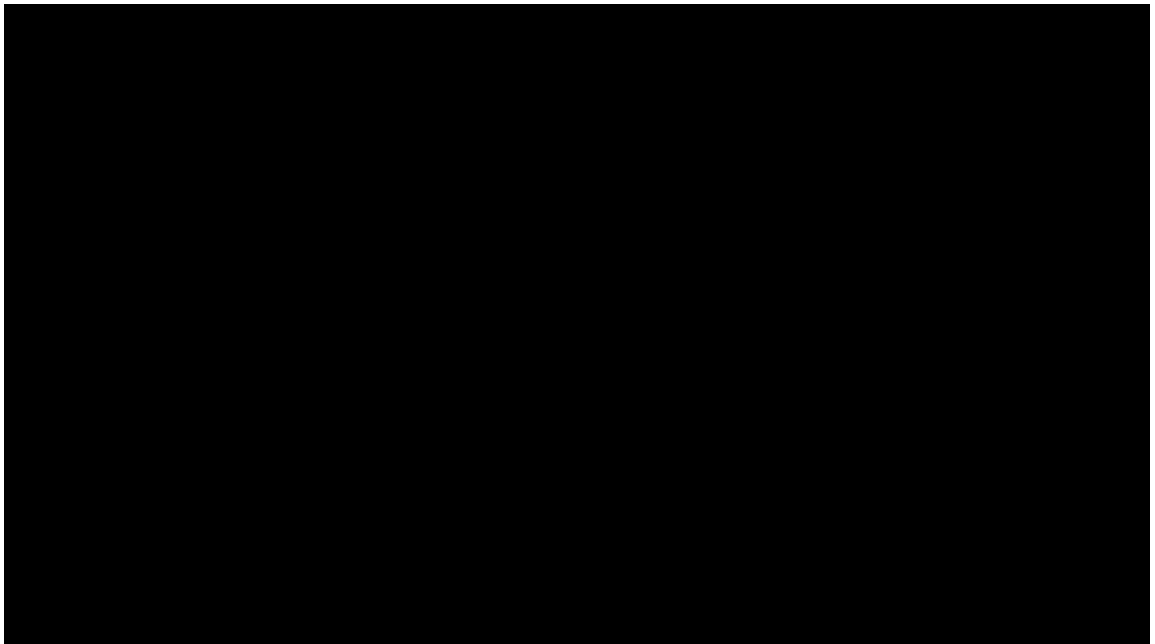


Fig. 5 Francisco de Zurbarán
Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Cup of Water
1633
Oil on canvas
62.2 x 109.5 cm
Norton Simon Museum

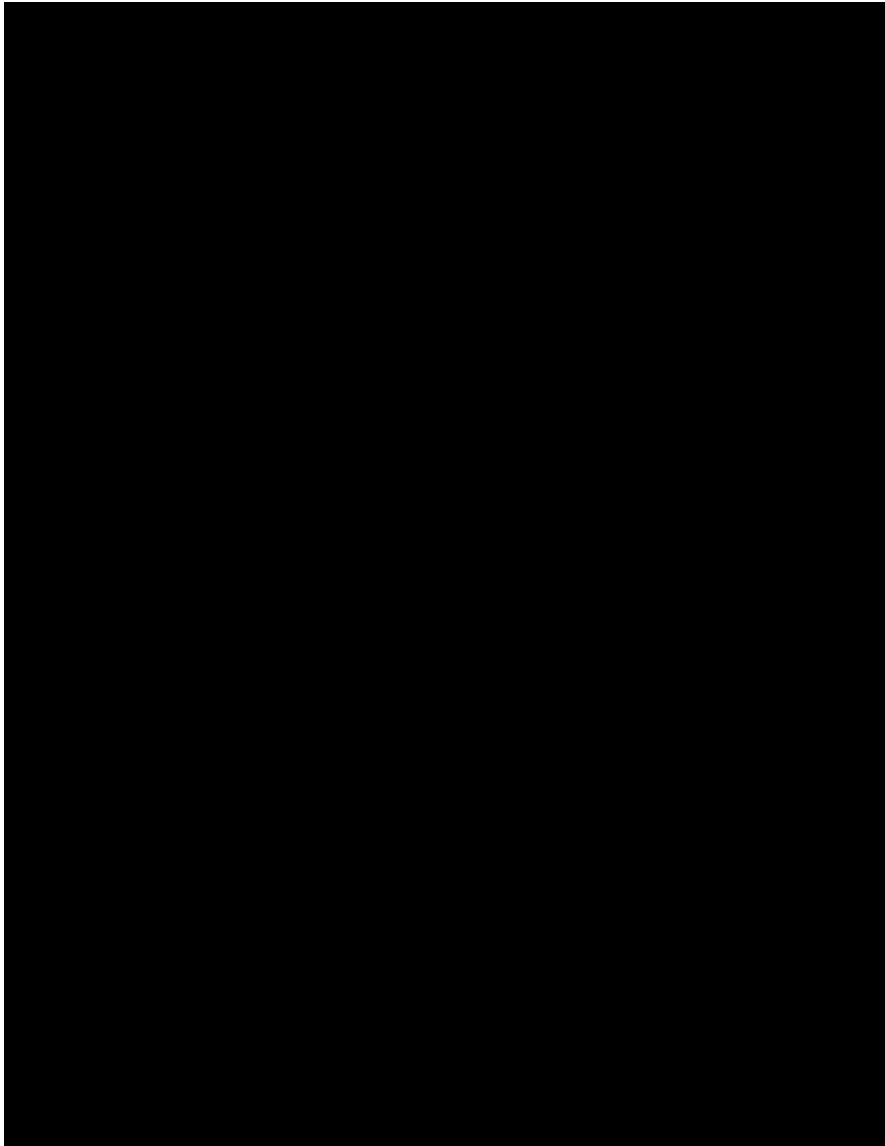


Fig. 6 Peter Doig
Figures in Red Boat
2005–7
Oil on linen
250 x 200 cm
Private Collection, New York

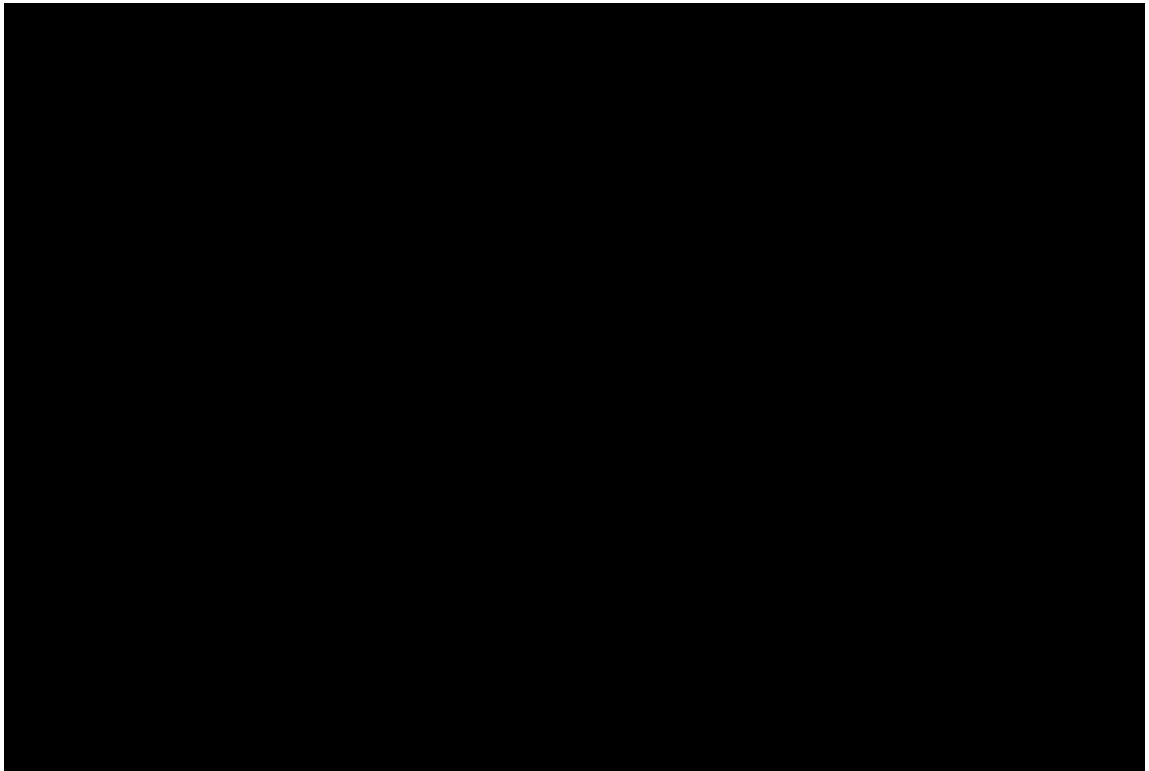


Fig. 7 Peter Doig
Gasthof Zur Muldentalsperre
2000–2000
Oil on canvas
196 x 296 cm
Collection of Nancy Lauter McDougal and Alfred
L. McDougal; Partial and promised gift to The
Art Institute of Chicago in honour of James
Rondeau, 2003

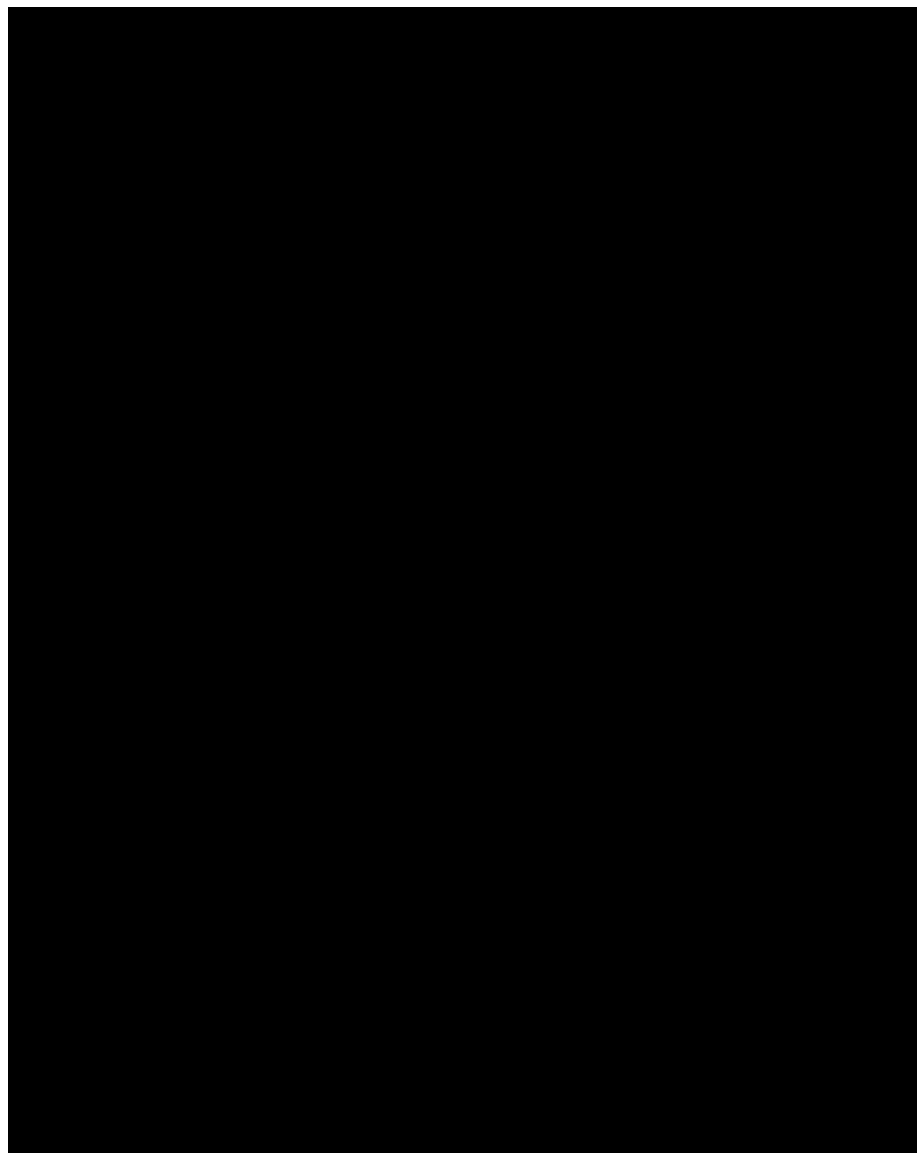


Fig. 8 Peter Doig
Blotter
1993
Oil on canvas
249 x 199 cm
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

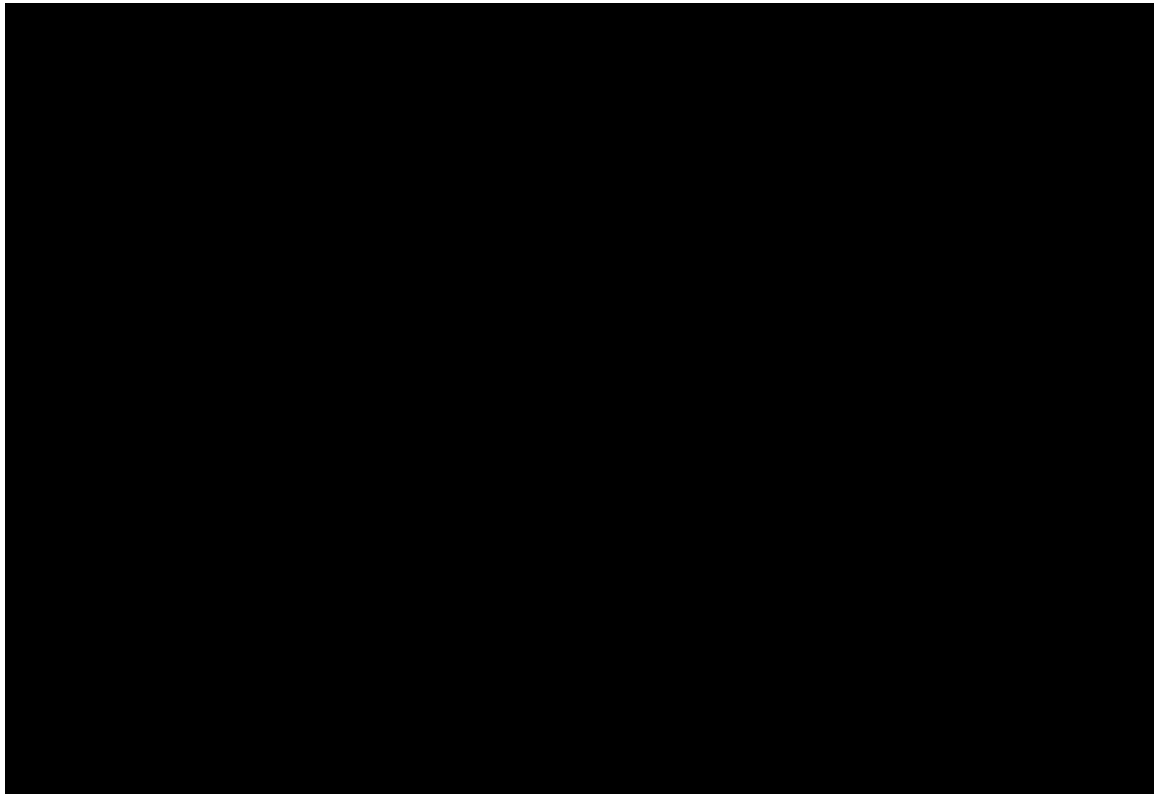


Fig. 9 Peter Doig

100 Years Ago

2000

Oil on canvas

200 x 296 cm

Collection of Beth Swofford

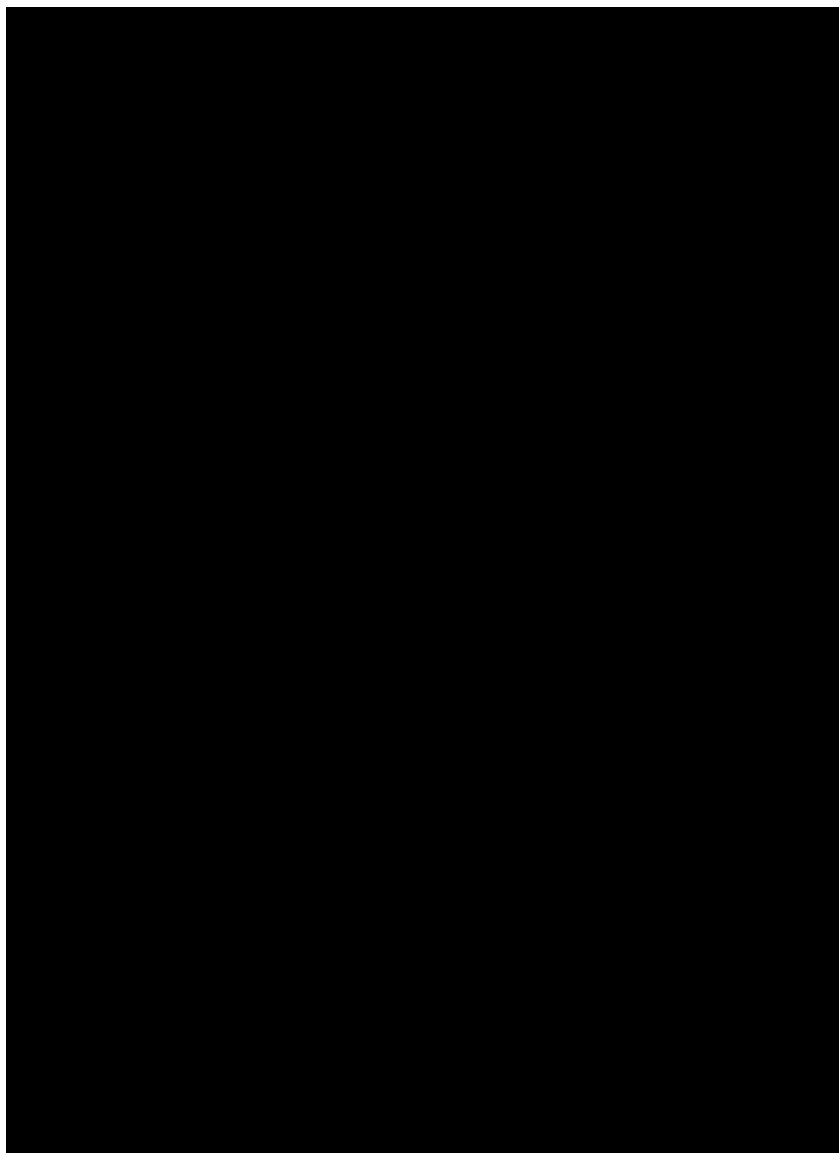


Fig. 10 Peter Doig
Reflection (What does your soul look like)
1996
Oil on canvas
295 x 200 cm
Mima and César Reyes Collection, Puerto Rico

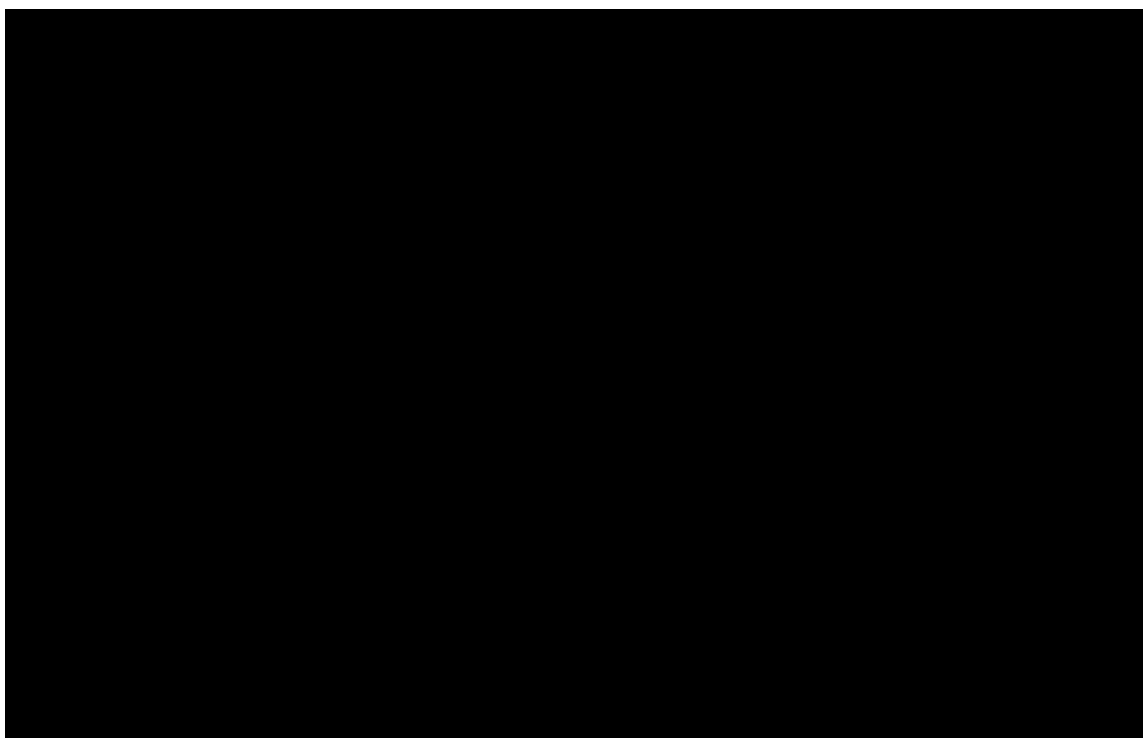


Fig. 11 Peter Doig
100 Years Ago (Carrera)
2001
Oil on canvas
229 x 359 cm
Centre Pompidou, National Museum of Art

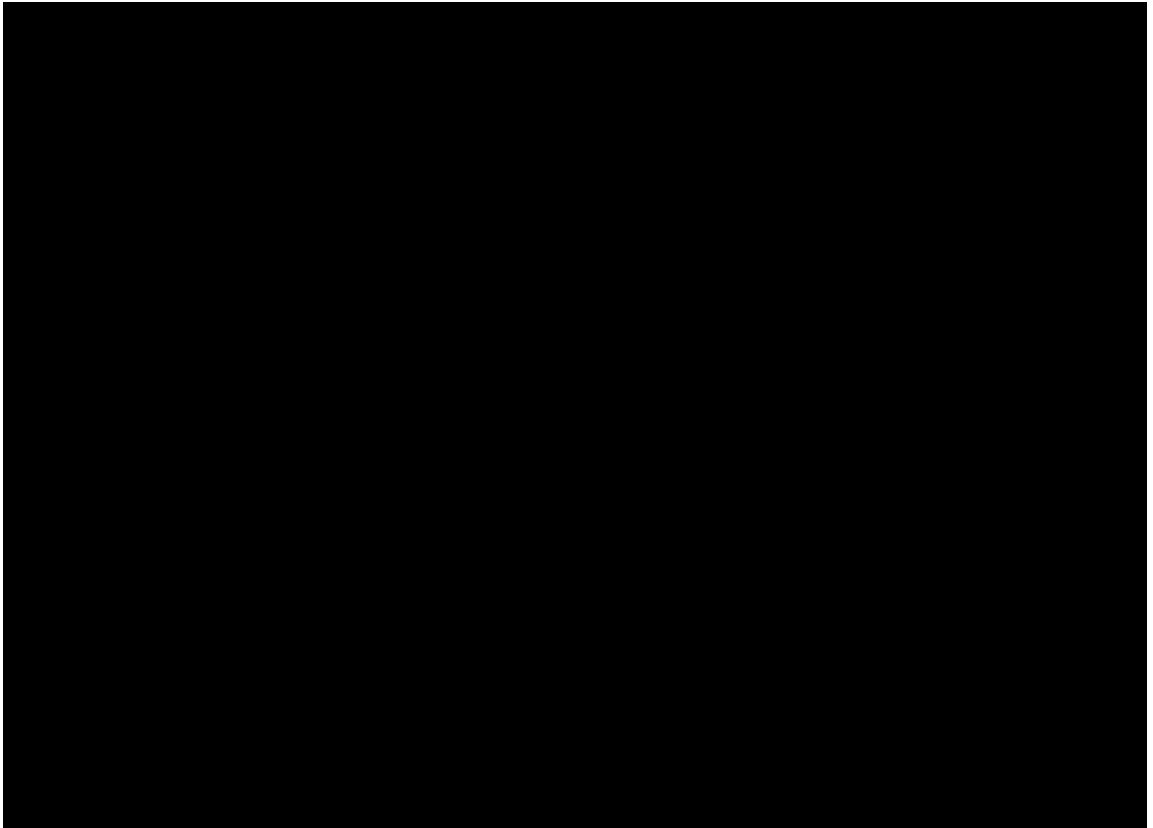


Fig. 12 Arnold Böcklin
Die Toteninsel
1880
Oil on canvas
110.9 x 156.4 cm
Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland



Fig. 13 Peter Doig
House of Pictures (Carrera)
2004
Oil on Canvas
200 x 301 cm
Gayle and Paul Stoffel



Fig. 14 Peter Doig
Metropolitain (House of Pictures)
2004
Oil on canvas
275.3 x 200 cm
Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich

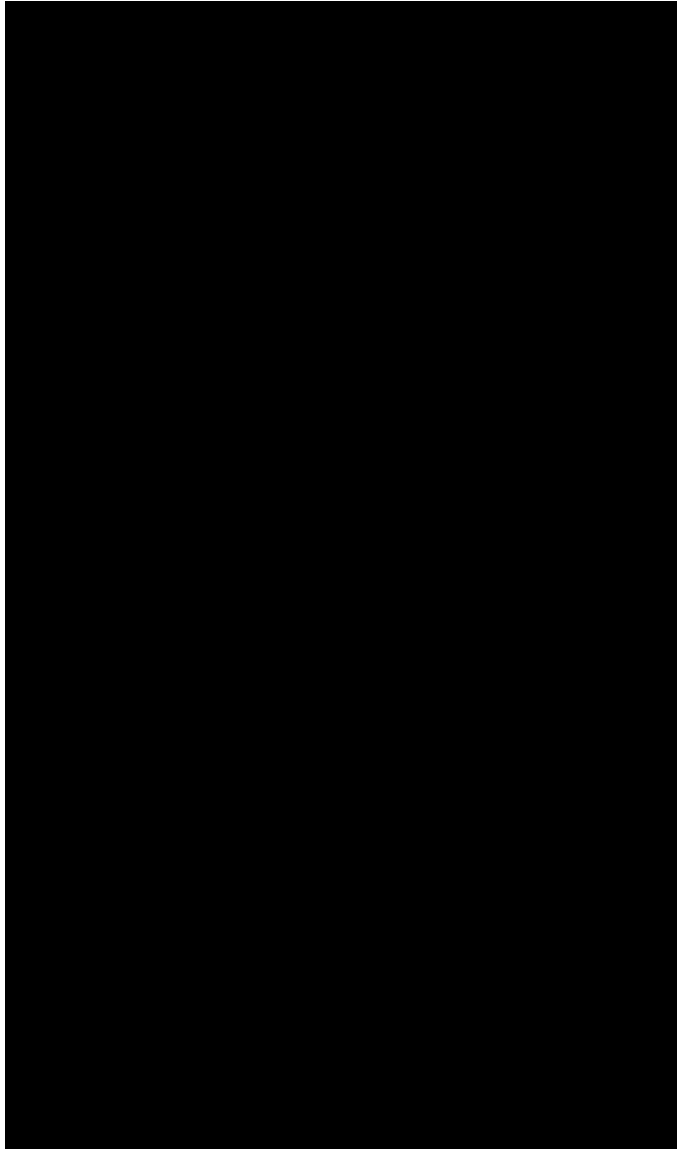


Fig. 15 Édouard Manet
The Absinthe Drinker
1859
Oil on canvas
180.5 x 105.6 cm
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Denmark

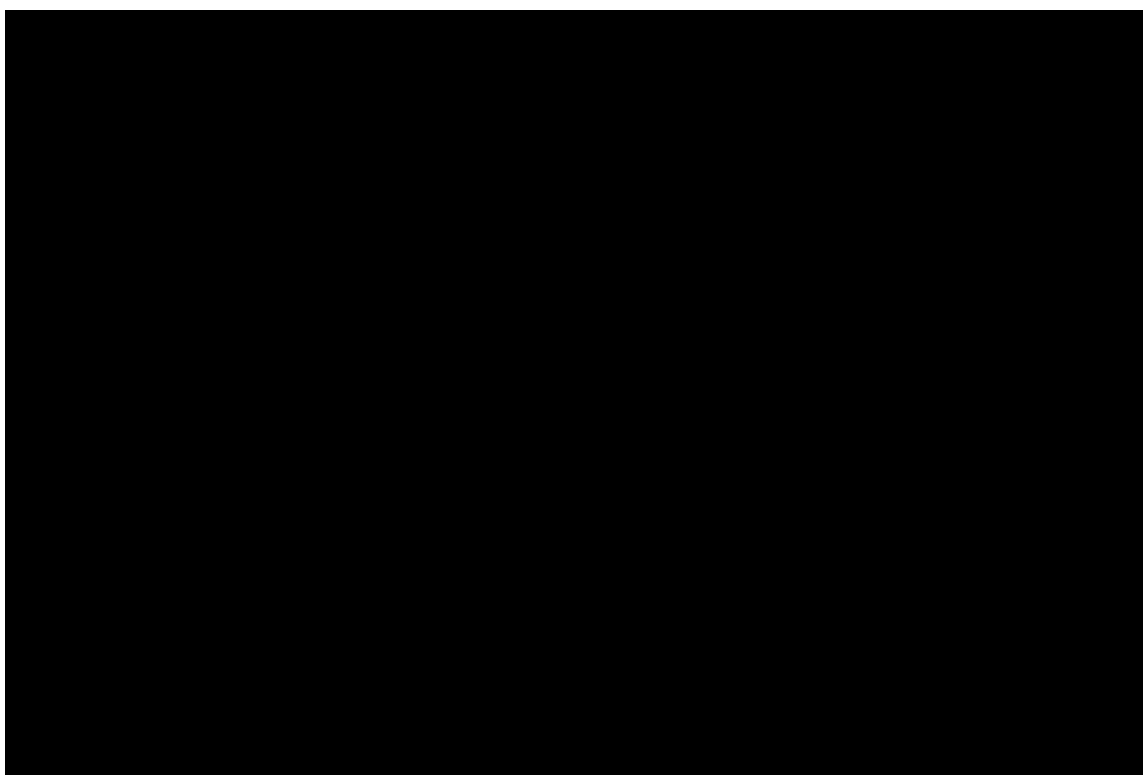


Fig. 16 Friedrich Kunath
Old Love
2014
Acrylic, oil, graphite and ink on canvas
175 x 247 cm
Location unknown

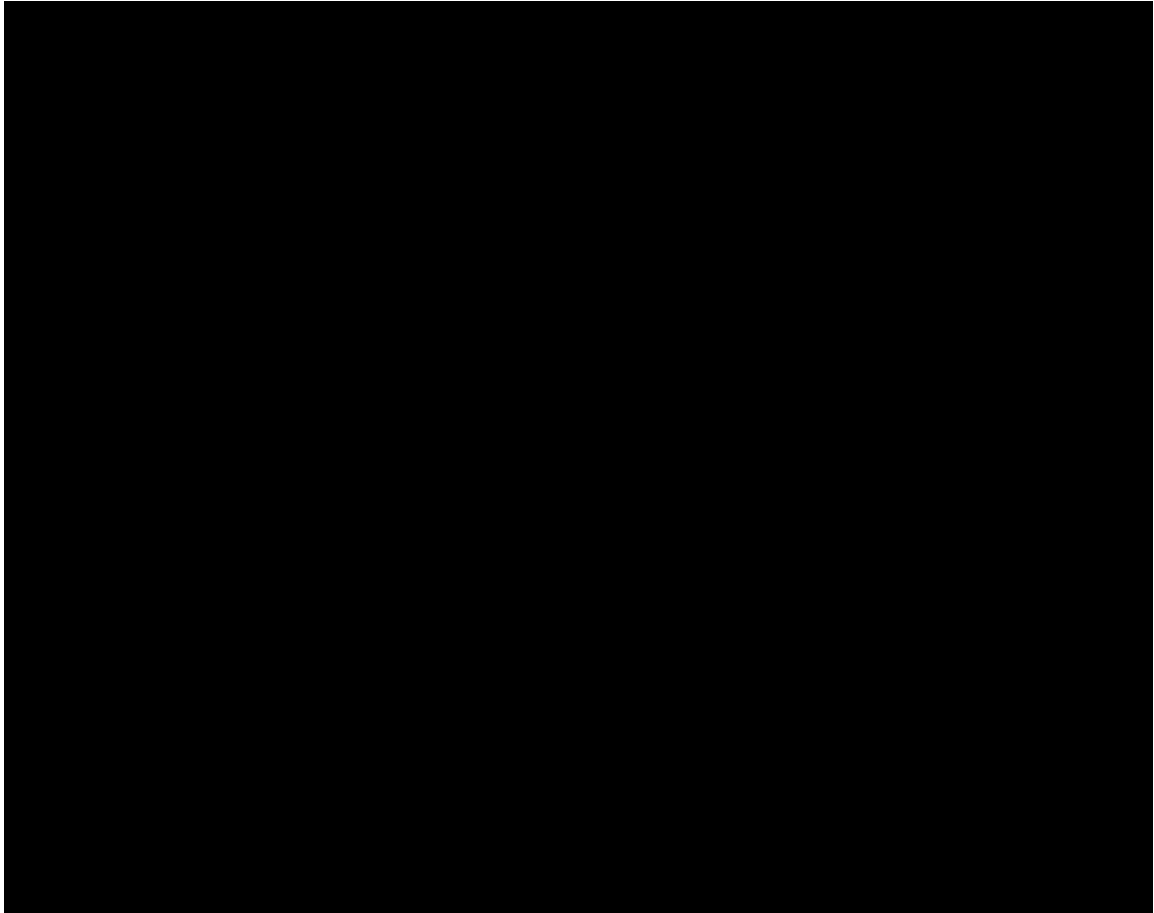


Fig. 17 George Caleb Bingham
Fur Traders of the Missouri
1845
Oil on canvas
74 x 87 cm
Met Museum, New York

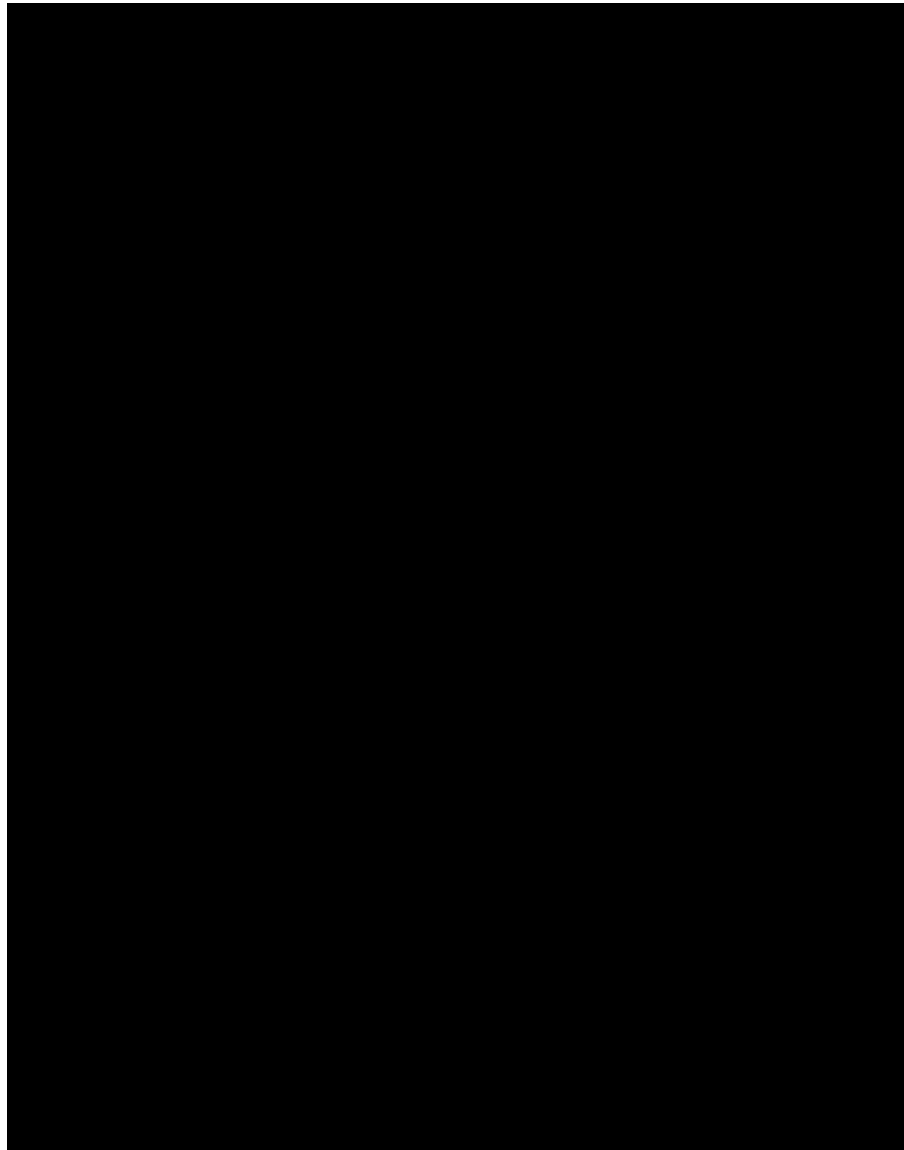


Fig. 18 Peter Doig

Window Pane

1993

Oil on canvas

250 x 200 cm

Collection of Victoria and Warren Miro

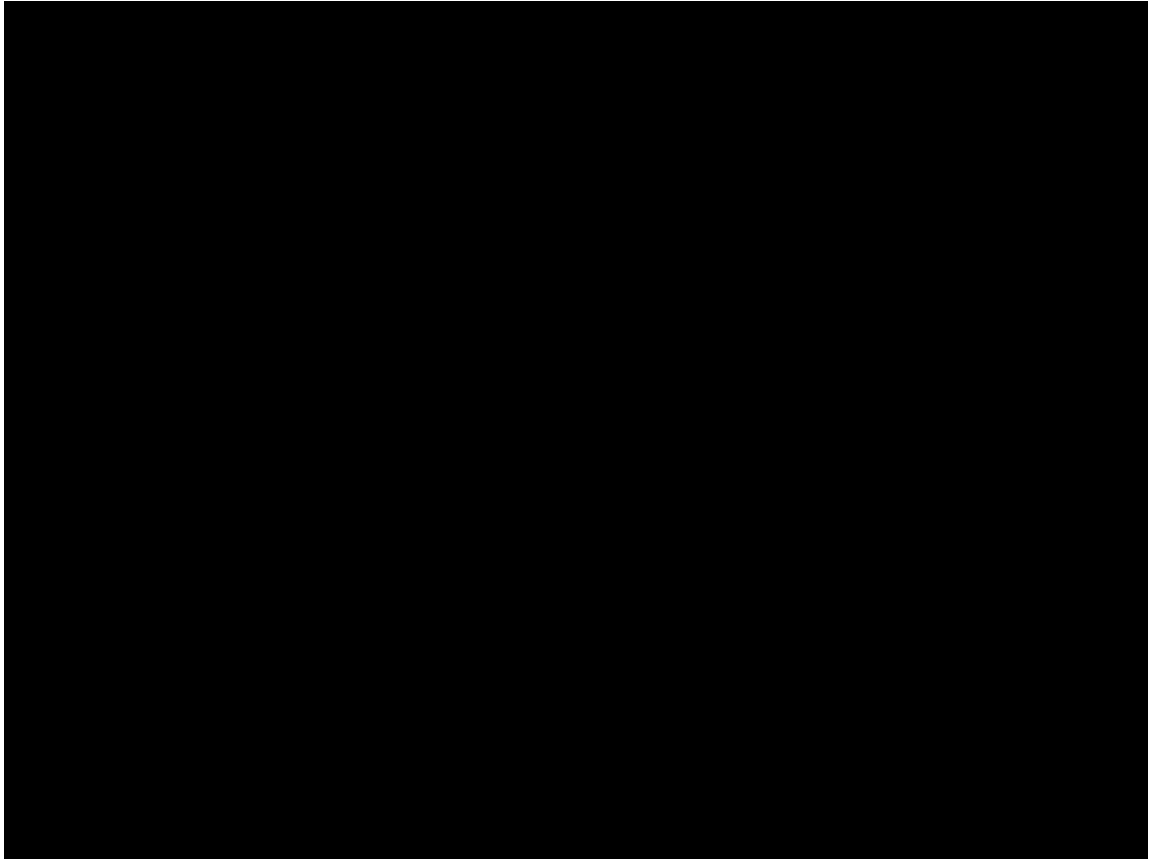


Fig. 19 Édouard Manet
A Bar at the Folies-Bergère
1882
Oil on canvas
96 x 103 cm
The Courtauld Gallery, London

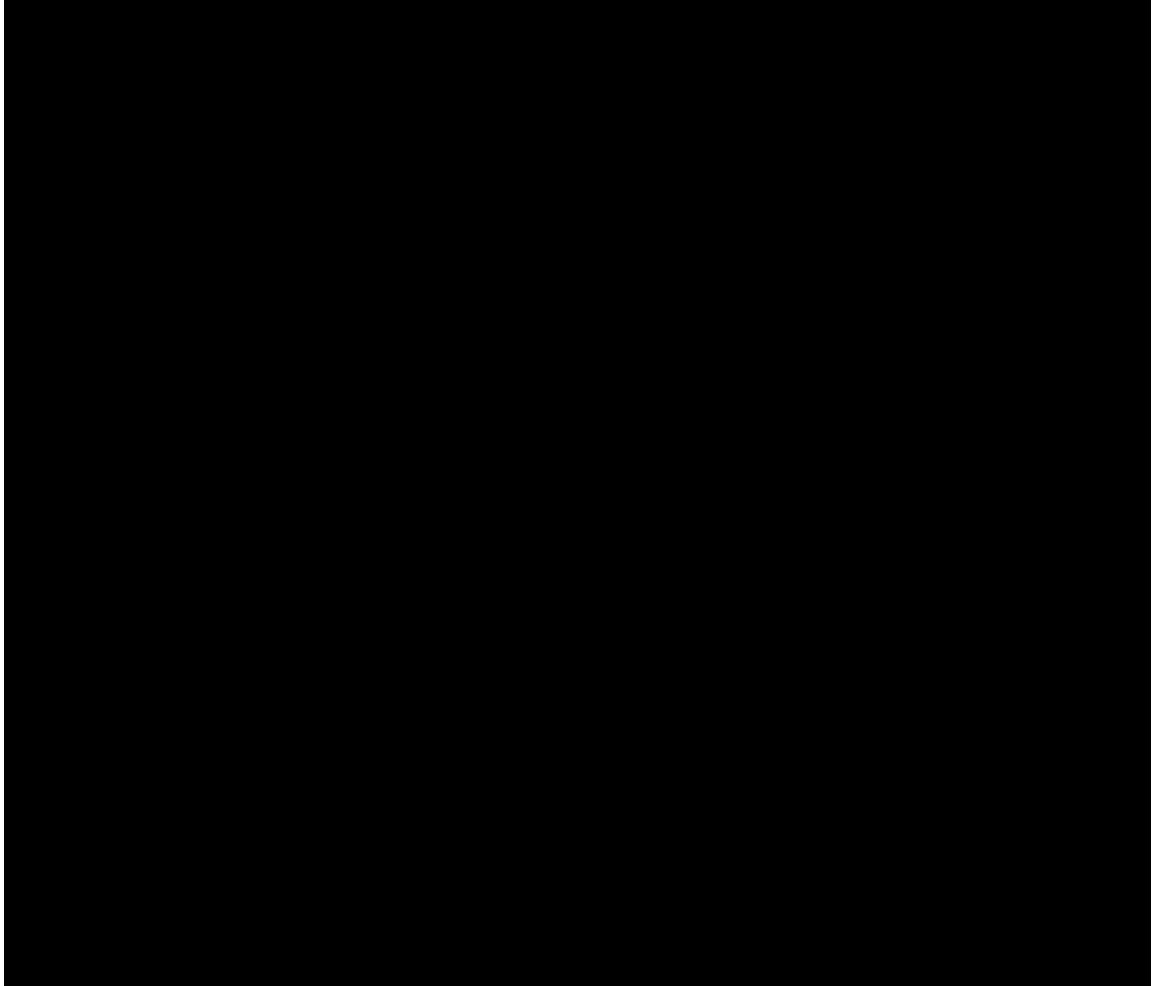


Fig. 20 Peter Doig
Man Dressed as Bat
2007
Oil on linen
300 x 350 cm
Private Collection

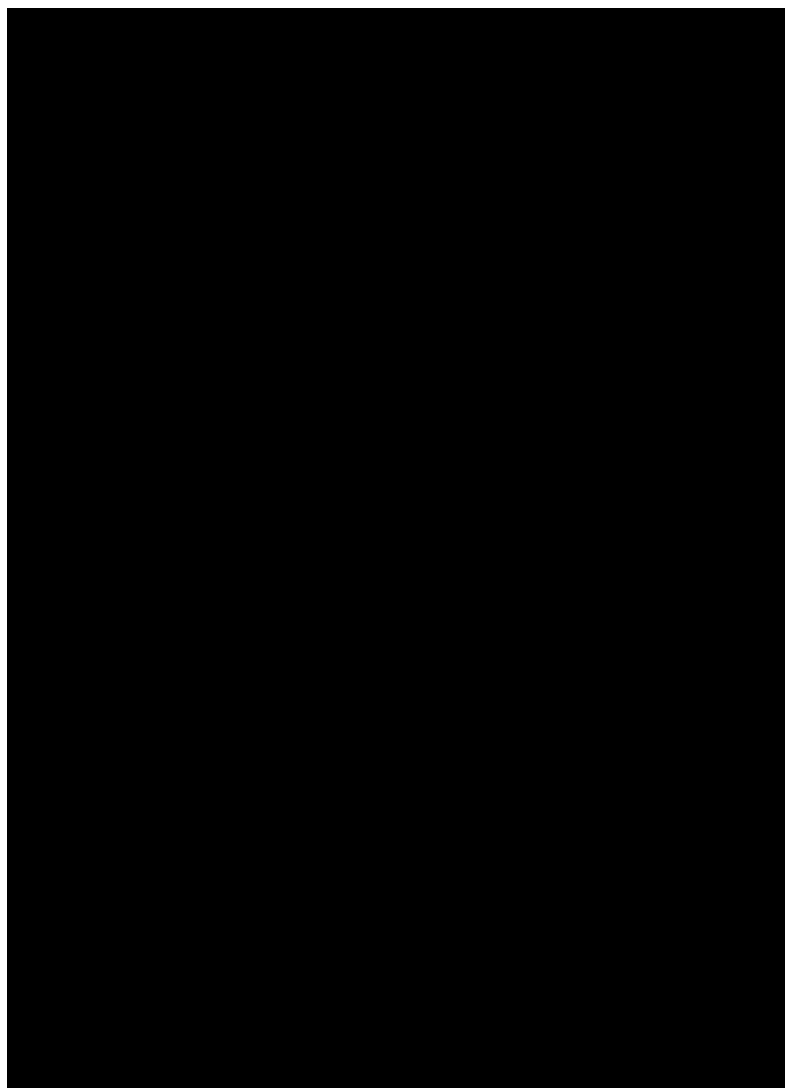


Fig. 21 Peter Doig

Pelican (Stag)

2003

Oil on canvas

276 x 200.5 cm

Courtesy Michael Werner Gallery, New York and
London

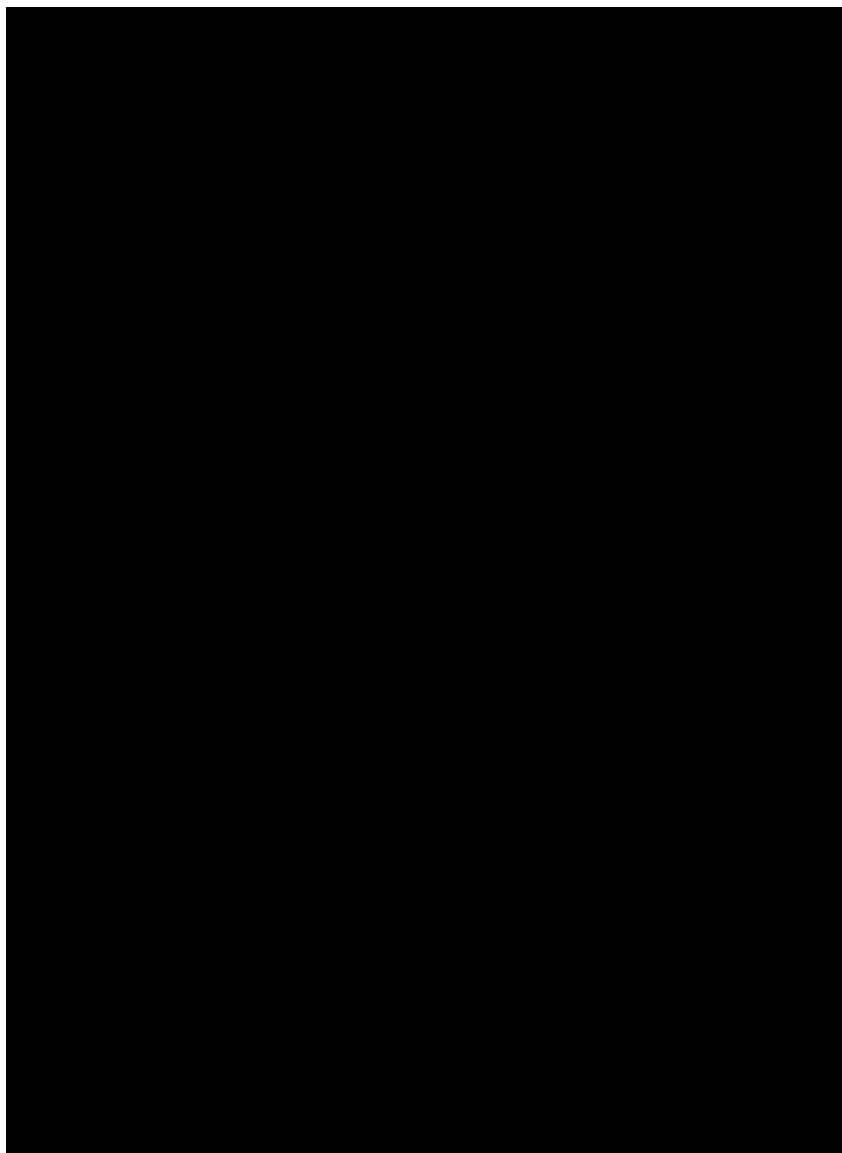


Fig. 22 Peter Doig
Pelican
2004
Oil on canvas
275 x 200 cm
Private Collection

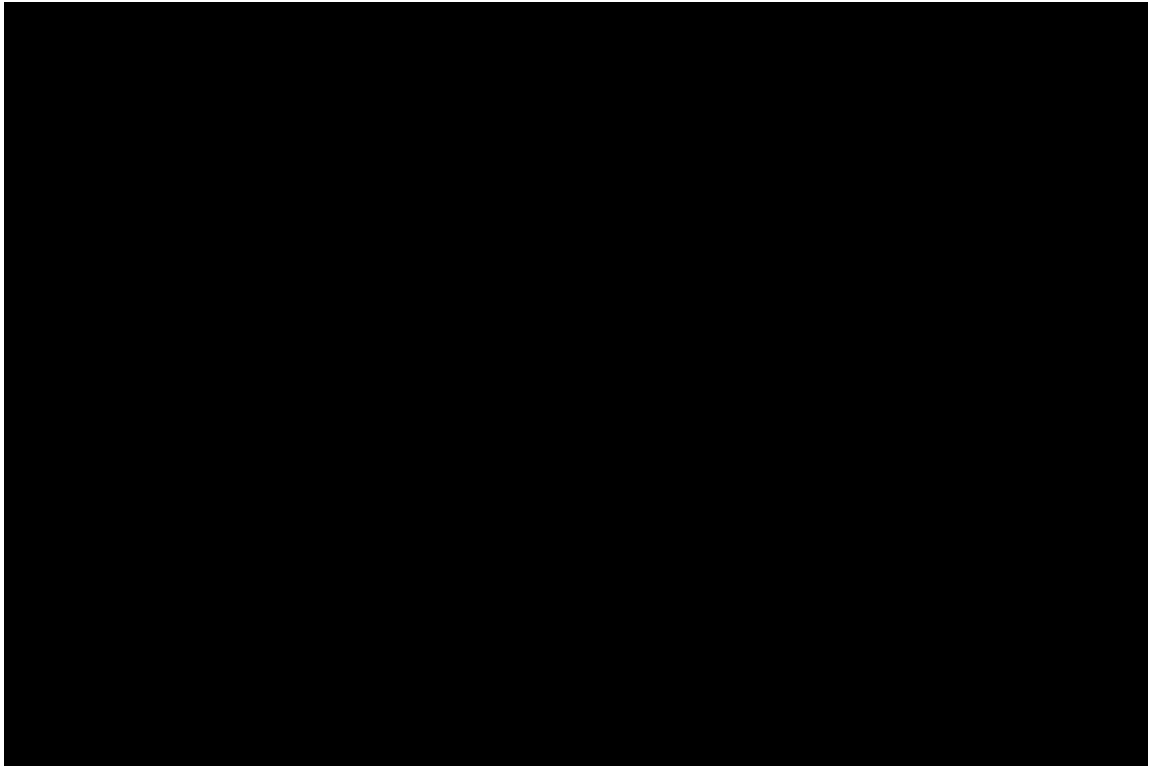


Fig. 23 Michael Simpson
Leper Squint (16)
2014
Oil paint on canvas (composite work of four panels)
381 x 732cm
Tate, London
(Installation from 'Flat Surface Painting' at Spike Island
2016, image by Stuart Whipps)



Fig. 24 Michael Simpson
Leper Squint (36)
2015

Oil on canvas
365 x 183 cm
Private Collection: Aachen

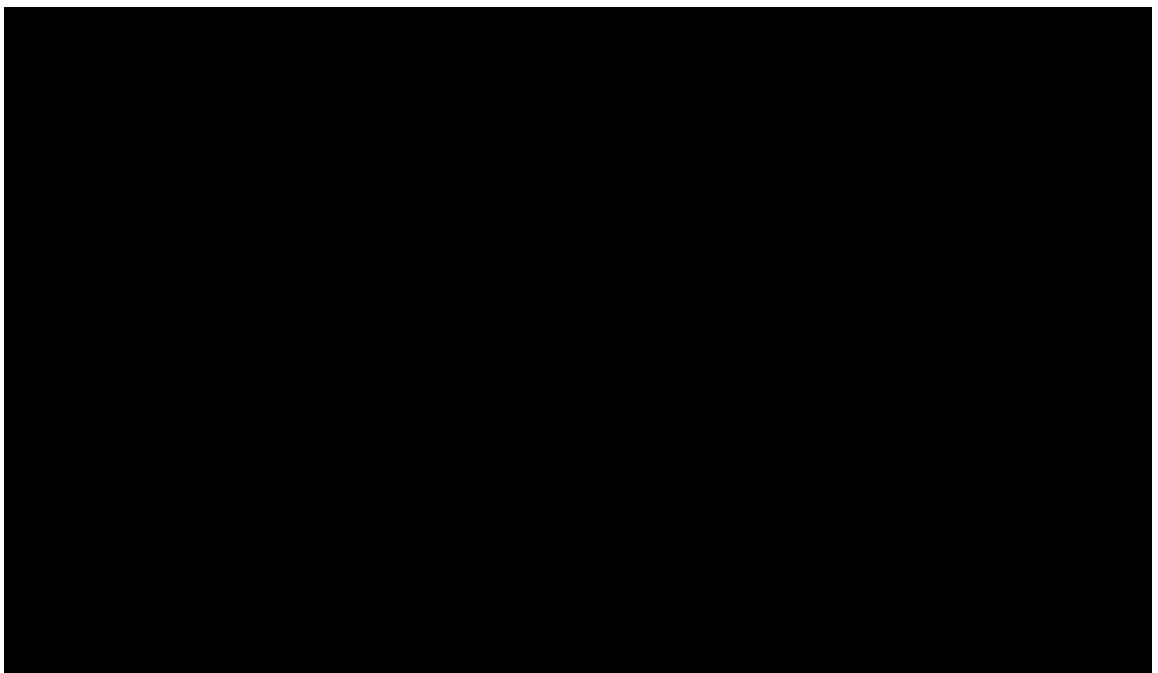


Fig. 25 Michael Simpson
Bench Painting (31)
1994–1995
Oil on canvas
534 x 244 cm
Private Collection

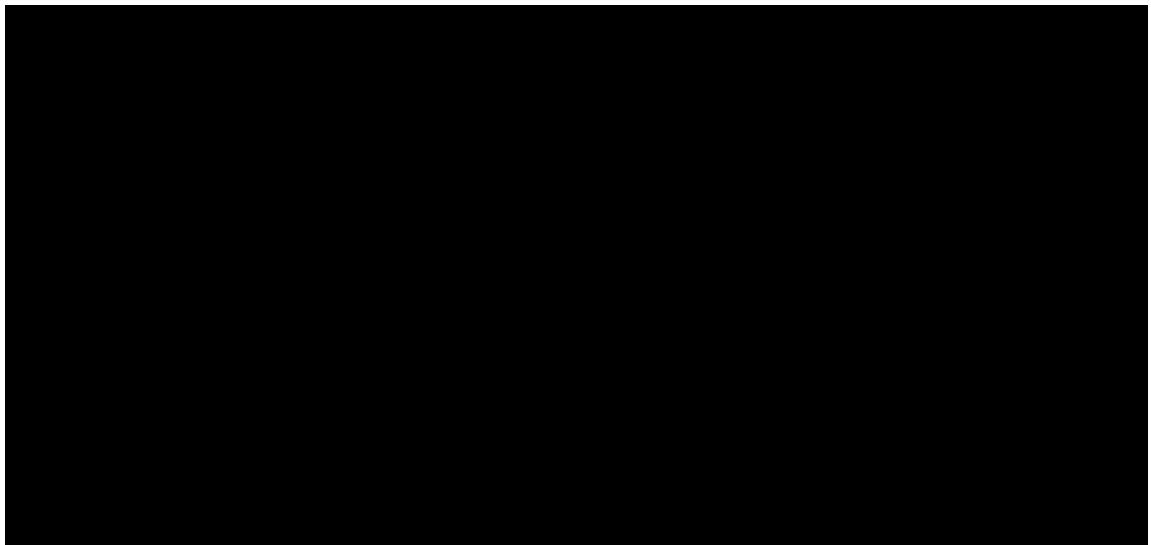


Fig. 26 Michael Simpson
Bench Painting (42)
1994–1995
Oil on canvas
534 x 244 cm
Control Techniques The Arup Building



Fig. 27 Michael Simpson
Bench Painting (50)
1996–1998
Oil on canvas
530 x 238 cm
David Roberts Foundation Collection

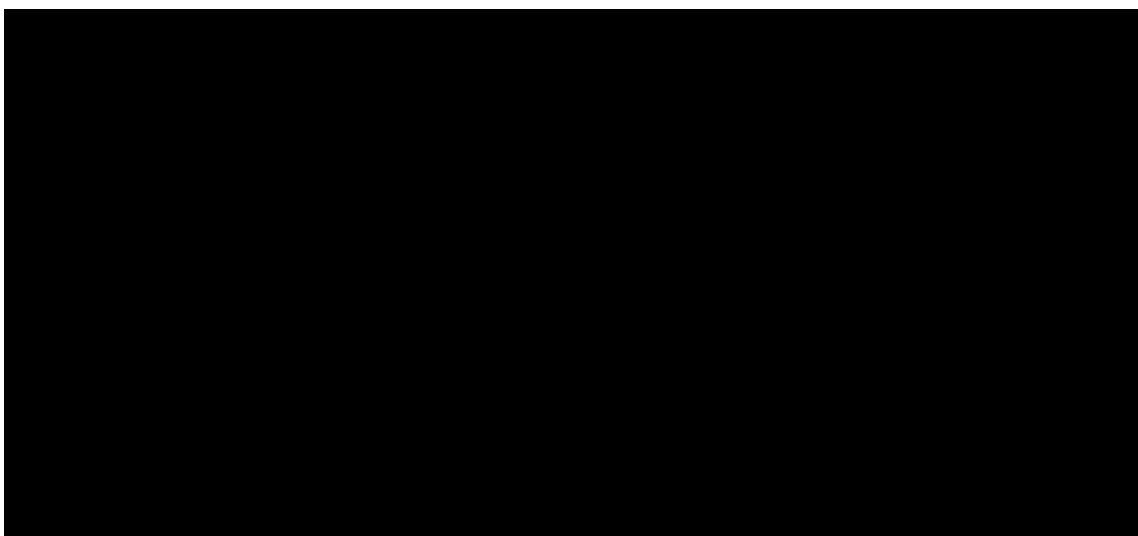


Fig. 28 Michael Simpson
Bench Painting (63)
2006
Oil on canvas
517 x 236 cm
Location unknown

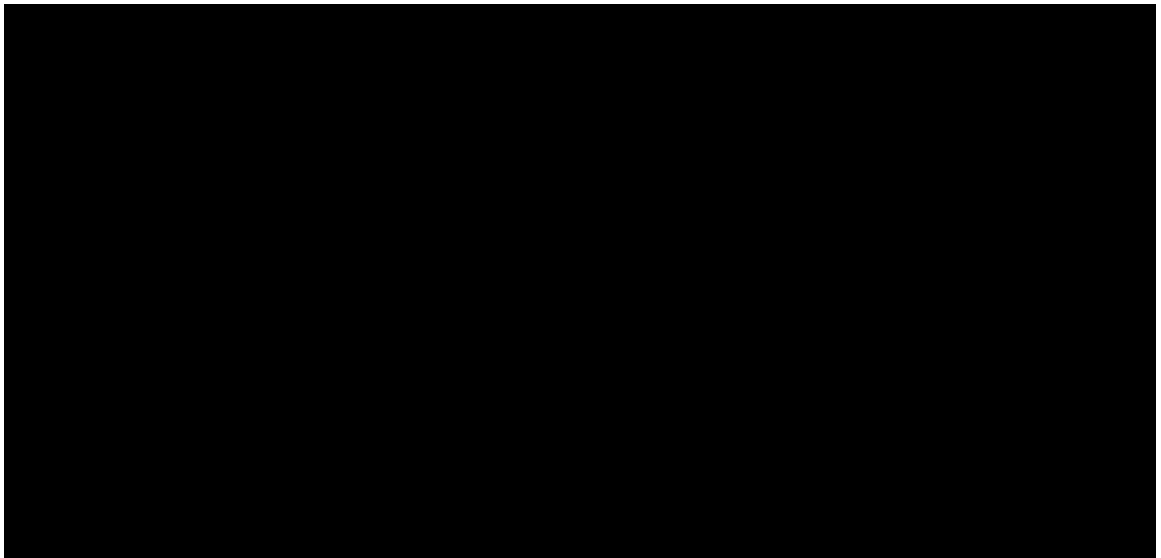


Fig. 29 Michael Simpson
Bench Painting (64)
2006
Oil on canvas
518 x 243 cm
Location unknown

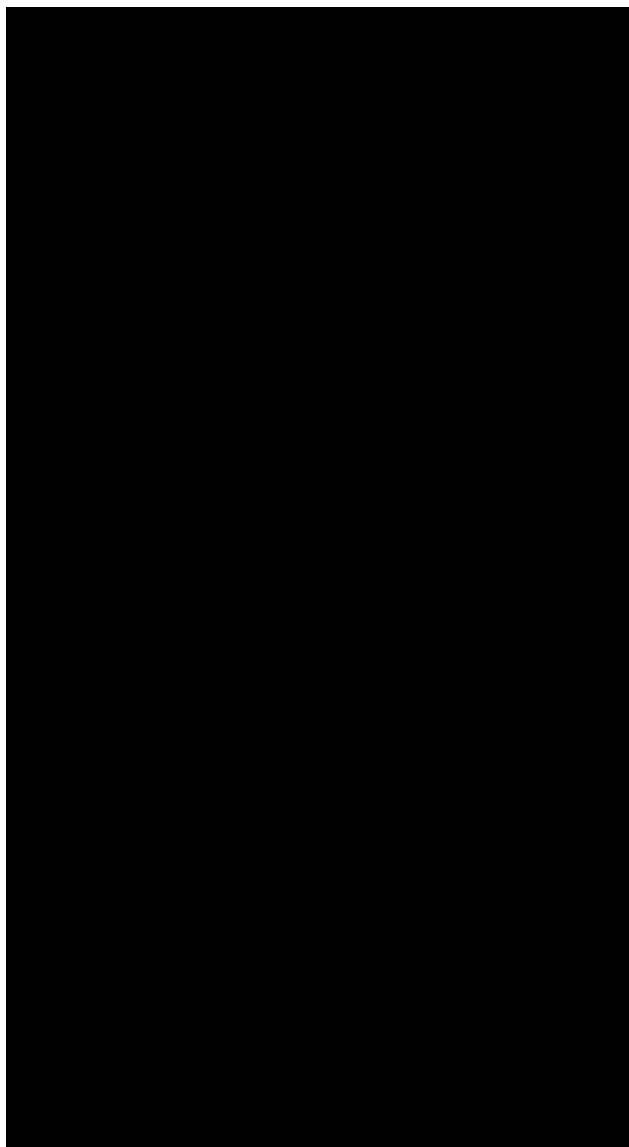


Fig. 30 Michael Simpson
Leper Squint 28
2015
Oil on canvas
240 x 130 cm
Private Collection, Düsseldorf

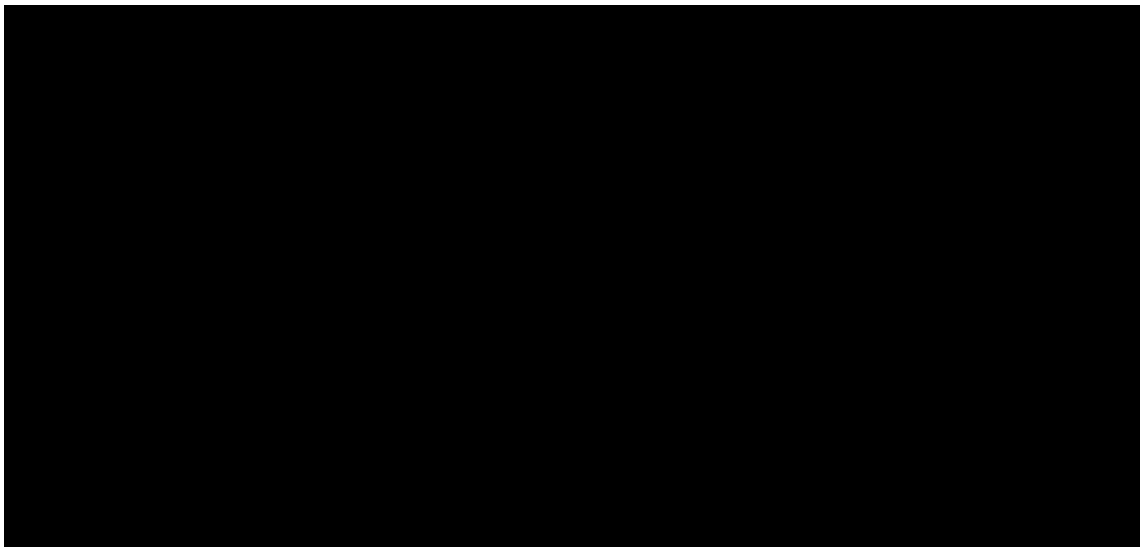


Fig. 31 Michael Simpson
Bench Painting 67 (Bruno Resurrect)
Reworked 2008
Oil on canvas
517 x 236 cm
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

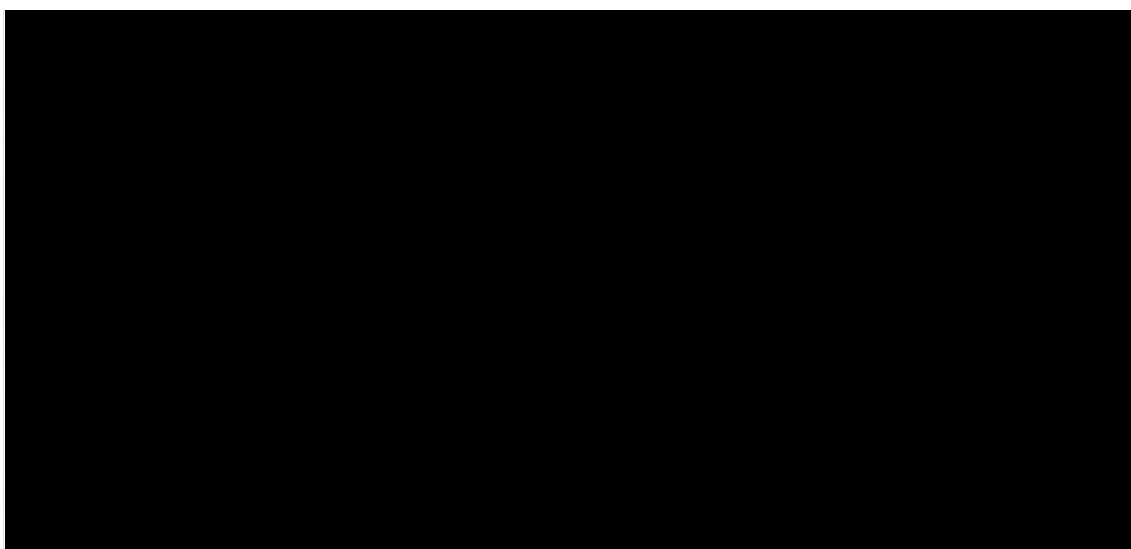


Fig. 32 Michael Simpson
Bench Painting 73
2009
Oil on canvas
518 x 245 cm
Blain Southern

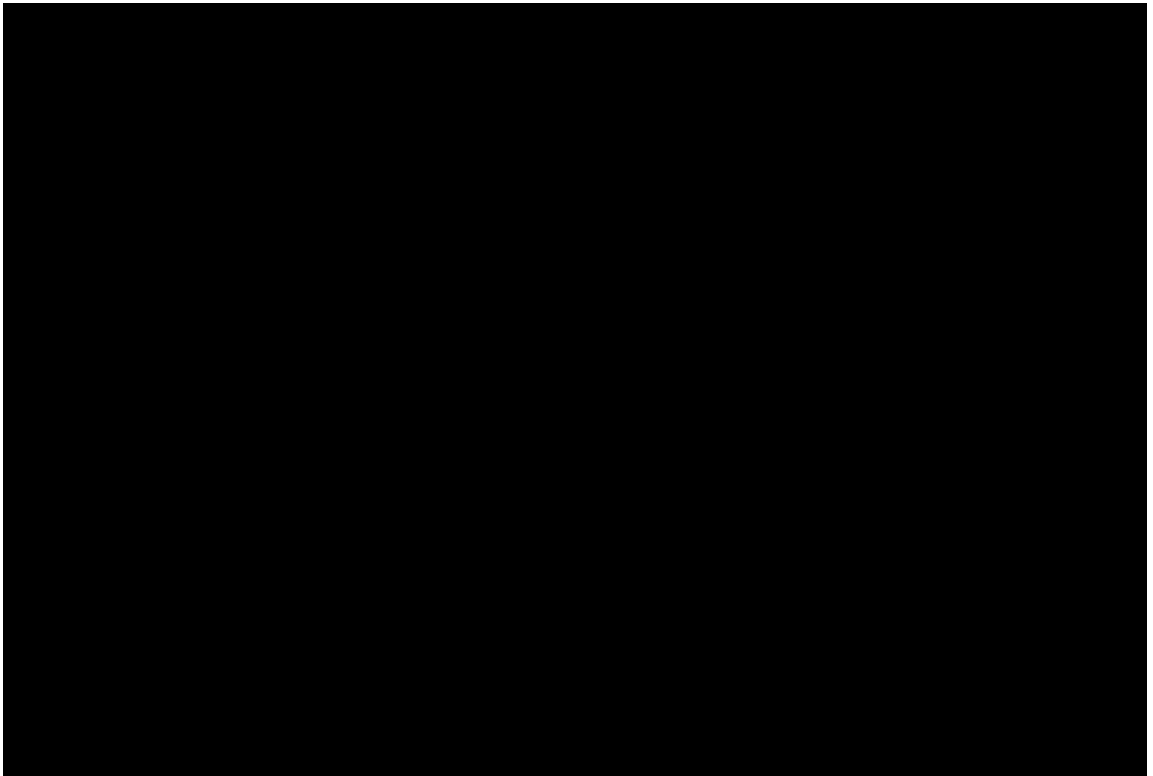


Fig. 33 Nicholas Poussin
Landscape with the Funeral of Phocion
1648
Oil on canvas
114 x 175 cm
National Museum of Wales, Cardiff

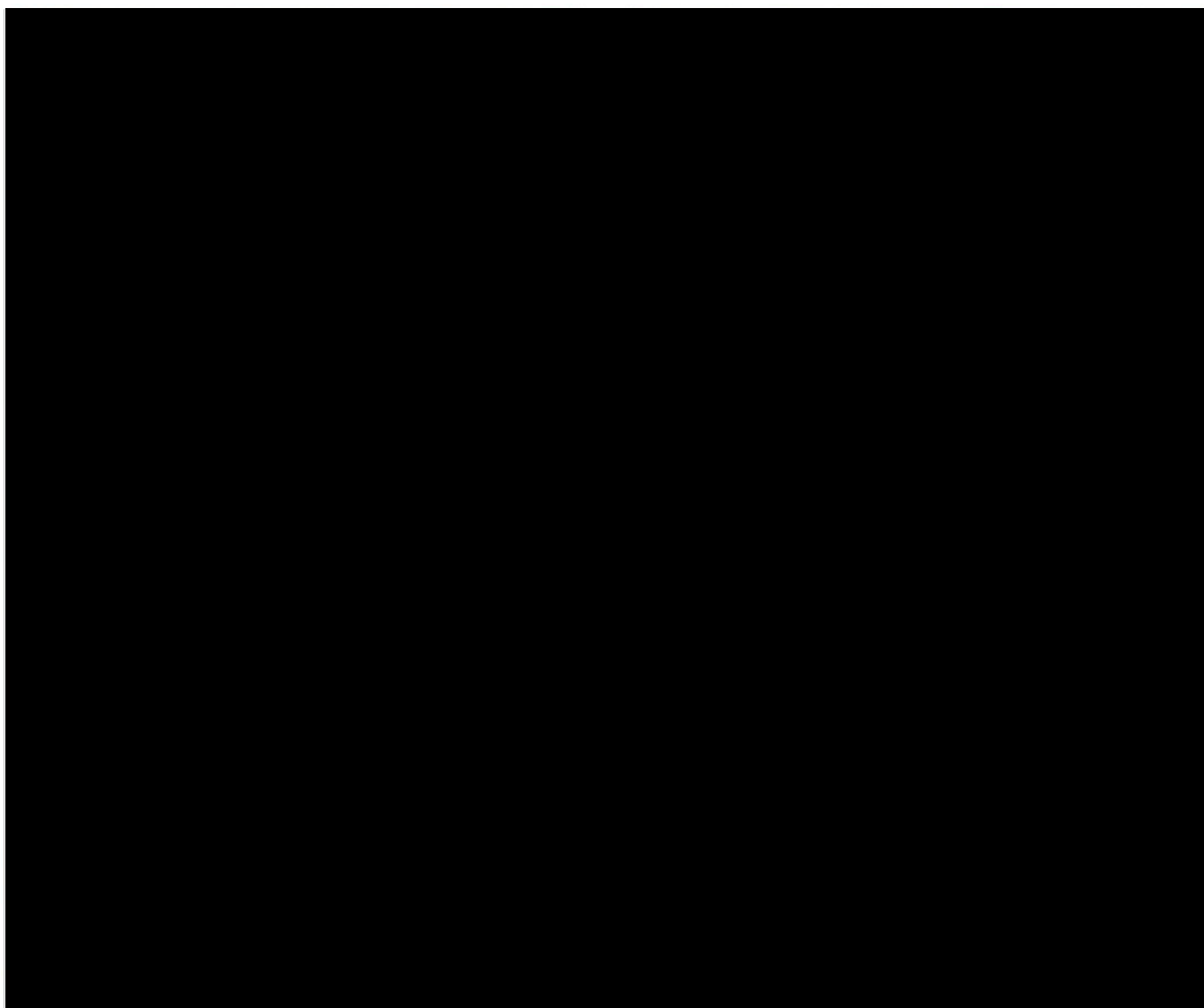


Fig. 34 Michael Simpson
Unnamed (Confessional)
(sometimes referred to as *Untitled (Confessional)*)
2015
Oil on canvas
282 x 160 cm each
Private Collection

Bibliography

Due to the wide-ranging nature of this thesis not every work that is footnoted in the body of this text is included here as to do so would render the bibliography unwieldy. Here I have limited myself to those texts which I either make extensive use of or to which I refer specifically in the body of my thesis, or which contextualise my thinking less specifically. At various points throughout my project I point towards other fields or sub-fields of interest on which my thesis touches but does not dwell. At points like these I have allowed myself extensive footnotes that function as mini-bibliographies guiding my reader to further relevant reading. In cases like these I do not, on the whole, repeat such references here. I have organised the following references, in the first instance, into categories to help my readers' navigation of the bibliography, where that category of belonging is reasonably clear, such as when texts are used to research a specific artist, image, writer or text in particular chapters. The sub-fields that relate to topics such as 'The Essay', 'Practice-led PhDs' and so on, are an indicator, again meant for ease of navigation.

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